

THE 100 BEST GAMES OF E3 2019

EDGE

THE FUTURE OF INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT

STAR WARS

JEDI

FALLEN ORDER

THE MAKERS OF TITANFALL
DELIVER THE ACTION GAME
STAR WARS DESERVES

#335

SEPTEMBER 2019

PREVIEWED

ELDEN RING
CYBERPUNK 2077
THE LEGEND OF ZELDA:
BREATH OF THE WILD 2
JOHN WICK HEX
FINAL FANTASY VII:
REMAKE



Step inside the party, disrupt the whole scene

E3 is all about expectations. The predictions, rumours and leaks start weeks, if not months ahead of time these days. Long before we head off for the airport, let alone sit down at our first press conference, we have a broad picture of what to expect from the show. Publishers and platform holders speak often about meeting their players' expectations; their PR folks, always mindful of a potential crisis, talk about managing them.

The natural downside of that is everyone has pretty much made their minds up about something before it has even happened, which threatens to rather take the buzz out of the most exciting videogame event on the calendar. E3 wasn't quite as enthralling this year as we'd hoped; we found an industry largely content to shut up and play the hits while the clock runs down on the current console generation. Nonetheless, in and among all that, we found plenty we didn't see coming.

Given that only a couple of years ago the entire Xbox press conference was leaked, it's to Microsoft's credit that it managed to keep Keanu Reeves' appearance on its stage a secret. Which is to say nothing of how CD Projekt Red kept under wraps the fact that in *Cyberpunk 2077* Reeves plays an AI NPC that will be by your side for most of the game. That was just the start of it. In Knowledge and Hype, we run down a show that, for all its samey-ness, always finds ways to surprise.

Yet nothing confounded our expectations more in Los Angeles than the game on this month's cover. We'll forgive you for not expecting much of *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order*. EA's track record with the Star Wars licence has been abysmal; Respawn, a fine studio, has only ever made shooters; and the demo shown at EA Play suggested a linear action-adventure with simplistic combat. What we find draws inspiration from the likes of *Dark Souls*, *Metroid* and *Zelda*, a game with an intricate world and patient, technical combat. After more false starts than we can count, this might be the Star Wars game we've been looking for. Our story begins on p76.



games

Hype@E3

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The Legend Of Zelda: Link's Awakening, Gears 5, Blair Witch, Oninaki, Destiny 2: Shadowkeep, Luigi's Mansion 3, Contra: Rogue Corps, Doom Eternal, Telling Lies, Sayonara Wild Hearts, Daemon X Machina, Fire Emblem: Three Houses, Control, Astral Chain, Scavengers, Afterparty, Shenmue III, Creature In The Well, Wolfenstein: Youngblood, Planet Zoo, Pokémon Sword And Shield, Monster Hunter: World – Iceborne, Code Vein, Samurai Gunn 2, Borderlands 3, Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare, Commander Keen, Phoenix Point, The Dark Pictures Anthology: Man Of Medan, The Outer Worlds, The Dark Crystal: Age Of Resistance Tactics, Ikenfell, Undermine, Ghost Recon: Breakpoint, Mario & Sonic At The Olympic Games – Tokyo 2020, Ancestors: The Humankind Odyssey, FIFA 20, Mosaic, Battletoads, Gears Pop!, Blazing Chrome, Panzer Dragoon: Remake, Mare, Remnant: From The Ashes, Last Oasis, Auto Chess

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Final Fantasy VII: Remake, Animal Crossing: New Horizons, Gods & Monsters, Phantasy Star Online 2, Microsoft Flight Simulator, Evil Genius 2: World Domination, No More Heroes III, Ori And The Will Of The Wisps, 12 Minutes, Minecraft Dungeons, Watch Dogs Legion, Fall Guys, Halo Infinite, Super Smash Bros. Ultimate, Cyberpunk 2077, Dragon Ball Z: Kakarot, Lego Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga, Spiritfarer, Marvel's Avengers, Carrion, Roller Champions, Zombie Army 4, Genesis Noir, Unexplored 2: The Wayfarer's Legacy, Chivalry II, Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2, Outriders, Empire Of Sin, Way To The Woods, Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Quarantine, Psychonauts 2

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The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild 2, Elden Ring, GhostWire: Tokyo, Baldur's Gate III, Deathloop, The Wild At Heart, Unto The End, Gritlands, Hollow Knight: Silksong, Bleeding Edge, Wasteland 3, Midnight Ghost Hunt, Tunic, John Wick Hex, Sniper Elite VR, Starmaner, Cyber Shadow

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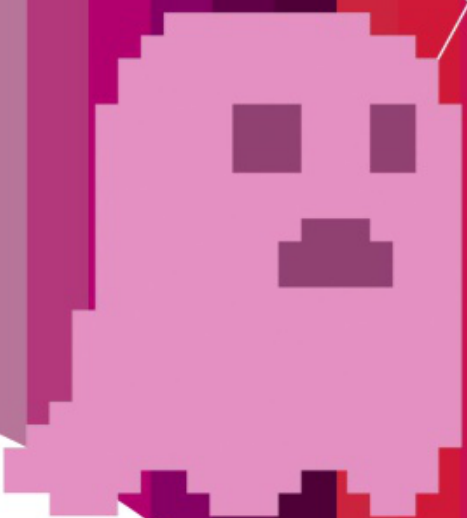
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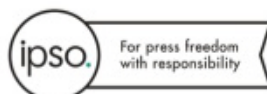
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PS4

ATLUS



Keanu Reeves is having a busy time in games of late: in addition to his turn in *Cyberpunk 2077* he can also be found in *Fortnite* and *John Wick Hex*



Those who show up

Microsoft **seizes the advantage** as the industry gears up for a new generation

Every year, on Internet forums and social media, in website articles and comment sections, and even in the bars and restaurants around the Los Angeles Convention Center, people debate who has 'won' E3. It's always been a facile question – the real winners are the ones who get to spend a week in the sunshine playing games and drinking free cocktails, obviously – and the very notion of one company beating another plays into the often troubling tribalistic relationship that videogame lovers have with the companies that make their favourite games and systems. But it's always been instructive in a broader sense: only by weighing up the relative merits of various publishers' and platform holders' endeavours can we form a broader picture of where the industry is, and where it is headed. Yet E3 2019 was the year that consigned that question to the bin for good. It is no longer appropriate to ask who won E3. Instead we must assess if anyone has finally managed to kill it.

The real story of E3 this generation is one of withdrawal, or at least the appearance of it. The PS4 era has seen EA decamp to its own event in Hollywood, EA Play; Microsoft does likewise with the opening of the Microsoft Theater, now host to the Xbox press conference, a fan event and media appointments; and big publishers opting against having a booth presence on the E3 show floor. This year it was Activision's turn – 2K, which didn't bother last year, was back again with a new *Borderlands* to sell. Perhaps Activision will be back next year. Perhaps 2K will be gone again. Perhaps it will be someone else's turn. Whoever it is will not make anywhere near the same impact by skipping E3 as Sony just did.

When Shawn Layden confirmed that the PlayStation operation would be sitting E3 out this year, opinion was starkly divided. Layden's admission that he didn't want to unduly raise expectations – with PS4 winding down, there are naturally

fewer firstparty games to talk about – made a certain sense. A few missteps aside, Sony has been on excellent form at E3 during the PS4 era, and there is no point in ending the generation on a bum note. The counterpoint to all that is the suspicion that this heralds the return of the old Sony: the one that made such a mess of PS3 precisely because PS2 had been such a runaway success. Maybe history is repeating, and the old hubris is back. It takes a heck of a lot of confidence – and most likely a fair bit of arrogance – to think you can opt out of the biggest videogame show on the planet and remain on top of the pile.

None of the other apparent wantaways who have supposedly withdrawn from E3 in recent years have really done so. EA may no longer have anything to do with E3 proper, but it holds its own event in Los Angeles during E3 week, a 15-minute Uber from the main convention. Microsoft is within walking distance of it. Activision may not have been on the show floor, but it has a corporate presence upstairs where *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare* is playable. Our hands-on session with this month's EA-published cover game also takes

place within E3's walls, ensuring its eligibility, like *COD's*, for Geoff Keighley's prestigious Game Critics Awards. Those who have pretended to walk away have, in their failure to do so, only reinforced E3's status as the global game industry's premier event. You skip it at your peril.

And it certainly seemed perilous for Sony when Keanu Reeves stepped out of the smoke and onto the stage at the Xbox conference, one overcome reveller speaking for us all by screaming "You're breathtaking" at the top of his lungs. Reeves was, as you will surely know by now, here to reveal his role in the game of last year's E3, *Cyberpunk 2077*, as well as announce its release date. His was the leading role in what felt, at the time and for some days afterwards, like a tip of the scales. Microsoft had absolutely

everything, because there was no one to stop it from having it. The result was its best E3 conference of the generation, and arguably of its entire time in the videogame business. Some suggested Microsoft had been given an open goal by Sony, and couldn't fail to score. In fact it was even easier than that.

If the PlayStation division is not too overcome with hubris to realise its error, one suspects there will be frustration at how good it made Microsoft look. The Xbox conference was not everything it had first seemed. The widely trailed debut of Project Scarlett revealed little: there were no game announcements, just a lot of (justified) bluster about tech specs. There was too much chatter about the effect of the console's solid state drive on loading times, seemingly in response to Mark Cerny having made such great hay of the importance of the SSD to PlayStation 5. The xCloud proposition was poorly explained and, like so much of Microsoft's activity at E3 over the past few years, leaves you unsure about how excited you should be about the thing that, on paper, most excites you. If you don't need Scarlett to play *Halo Infinite* (because it'll run on your existing Xbox One or PC, or because you can stream it over xCloud) and you don't need to buy it (because it's on Game Pass) then why should you be excited about a new generation? It is to Microsoft's tremendous credit that it doesn't seem to mind – it is building an ecosystem these days, not a single platform – but it can't help but suck the air out of the hype bubble. And hype, as we have often said, is the blood in E3's veins.

There were problems elsewhere too. Take away the thirdparty bomb-drops that, in any other year, would have been shared between the two platform holders, and this was largely business as usual for Microsoft. Its firstparty slate is still dominated by a rotating handful of timeworn IP – *Gears*, *Forza*, *Halo*, the other *Forza* – and even on their own terms, this was a poor showing from the old reliables. There was no mainline *Forza*, merely an expansion for last year's *Horizon 4*. *Gears 5*, despite being out this year, took only the form of a CG ►

Those who have pretended to walk away have, in their failure to do so, only reinforced E3's status



Attendance was down a touch: 66,100 passed through the doors, down from 69,200 in 2018. Given the absence of Sony, organisers will be happy enough



Getty/Christian Petersen

Never mind Keanu, Jon Bernthal (above) or Xbox heartthrob Phil Spencer (below). The year's breakout star was *GhostWire: Tokyo*'s effusive creative director Ikumi Nakamura (below right)



Getty/Frederic J. Brown



Getty/Christian Petersen

DRY AND DRY AGAIN
If E3 is really dying, why does it keep getting bigger?



This was the third year of E3 being open to the public, and also the third year of the E3 Coliseum, produced by The Game Awards' Geoff Keighley. Held in the LA Live complex round the corner from the convention centre, it's designed to bring fans closer to developers through on-stage interviews with the minds behind their favourite games, with a few curveballs along the way: Keighley interviewing Todd Howard and Elon Musk at the same time was as weird and awkward as you'd hope. It helps give E3 week more of a festival feel, the event spreading beyond the convention centre and taking fans with them. Fair enough – at least until you try to get a drink, and find half-hour queues at every watering hole in the vicinity.

trailer. *Halo Infinite* was merely teased with the cinematic that will open its campaign. It was, at least, in-engine. Sure, the usual spread of ID@Xbox games, an eye-catching (and eyebrow-raising) new acquisition in the form of Double Fine, trailers for just about every major thirdparty game in existence, and both the virtual and actual Keanu Reeves papered over the cracks in rollicking style. But the reality is that Microsoft is also keeping its powder dry for next year, when the next generation kicks off. Unlike Sony, it saw the value in putting on a show anyway.

To their credit, so did plenty of others. The Bethesda Showcase deserves to be remembered for more than the handful of overexcited superfans at front of house who cheered every game, and seemingly every sentence, with rapturous delight. The publisher, still a relative newcomer to the E3 press-conference circuit, successfully employs the Sony playbook, diving deep into games due out soon and turning heads with teases of further-off projects. Square Enix had its share of clappers too, but there was nothing insincere nor annoying about the reaction to the new trailer for *Final Fantasy VII: Remake*. We have heard our share of screams at E3 over the years. We have heard some roars. But this was a first. When fans got their first glimpse of the new-look Tifa Lockhart, the room simply *squealed*. It was hard not to get swept up in it.

We can't say the same for Ubisoft, though it too had its moments. There was no Nintendo star power this year, and certainly no Keanu. But there was The Punisher's Jon Bernthal (an antagonist in *Ghost Recon Breakpoint*) and Rob McElhenney, who with his co-creators of *It's Always Sunny In Philadelphia* is making a game-development comedy series called *Mythic Quest: Raven's Banquet*. It also had *Watch Dogs Legion*, and some games we've forgotten about because they aren't *Watch Dogs Legion*. We remain quite excited about *Watch Dogs Legion*.

There were bum notes elsewhere, naturally. EA Play reflected a publisher rather short on ideas, sacking off the



The weather – thanks for asking, by the way – wasn't so punishing this year. The midday sun was as fierce as ever, though, which made the leaden queue management at the Xbox conference even more irksome

traditional press conference in favour of a series of faux-casual developer chats. Much of the banter came off as insincere; that was preferable to the pretence that *Anthem* is a serious part of EA's future plans, which felt simply insane. Nintendo, meanwhile, is now an unknown quantity at E3. It is just another Direct to the Switch maker, which has proven itself as likely to drop a megaton on a wet Wednesday in February. This was good, solid stuff, though the long-rumoured Switch revision was nowhere to be seen and there were little in the way of surprises.

There was even – gasp – some bad news, with the admission that *Animal Crossing* had slipped to next year. Can the announcement of a *Breath Of The Wild* sequel possibly make up for such a transgression? Yes. Yes it can.

Just 13 years later – sorry, the jetlag gets worse with age – the show itself finally flung open its doors. And suddenly the script was flipped. If the run of press conferences suggested Sony was deeply wrong to opt out of the annual industry measuring contest, E3 proper showed just how much of a hole Sony's withdrawal had left. What had at first felt damnable was suddenly weirdly flattering. The West Hall, typically home

to Sony and Nintendo, was instead home to a typically rammed Nintendo and, around it, a barren, pointless wasteland. The only visible logo was that of French publisher BigBen Interactive. There was an esports area with a stage we only ever saw empty, and rows of chairs propping up a smattering of

exhausted punters. There were small stands for peripheral makers, and innumerate merch booths. Last year they had Kojima, Druckmann and many more on a stage to talk about their projects. This year? Available seating and *Pokémon* socks.

Still, the South Hall was on fine form, with some

confident showings from those that designed to show up. And after the catastrophic overcrowding of E3 2017, when the doors were first opened to the public, things finally appear to be settling down. Perhaps that just reflects an industry on the brink of change, happy going through the motions – and in some cases, sticking to the shadows – while it gets ready for the tumult of a new era. E3 has changed dramatically over the course of this generation; will the next one bring everything back together, or drag it even further apart? With the jetlag just about dealt with, we're already looking forward to finding out. ■

When fans got their first glimpse of the new-look Tifa Lockhart, the room simply squealed

Final Fantasy VII: Remake was the big winner at the Game Critics Awards (Edge sits on its judging panel). Only playable games are eligible



BABE IN THE WOODS

The maker of *Fran Bow* returns with an unsettlingly cute comedic adventure about seeing the world through the eyes of a child

An active imagination is part of being young. *Misfortune's* is particularly vivid: in dark choice-based comedy adventure *Little Misfortune*, she's headed into the forest on a quest to "beat the game" and win eternal happiness for her mother. Indeed, its art style is **Natalia Martinsson's** own explorable version of her childhood passions. "I wanted to feel inside of those children's books I loved so much when I was a little girl," she says. *Misfortune's* bobble

head and big eyes play up her cuteness, while her grey-masked mother has more realistic proportions: "Differences in the textures and pen marks give a deeper feeling to an item or character."

Killmonday Games is contrasting a sweet, childish perspective with a scary world of grown-ups – but your disembodied friend Mr Voice may be more than just a figment. This year on PC, you can decide for yourself. ■



Animated film *Song Of The Sea*'s charming and even slightly grimy fantasy locales influenced *Little Misfortune*'s style. "The perspectives and textures were of great inspiration," Martinsson tells us



Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



Getty/Saul Loeb

"The videogame industry made **\$43 billion** in revenue last year. The workers responsible for that profit deserve to collectively bargain as part of a union."

It seems US presidential hopeful **Bernie Sanders** is a secret **Edge** reader. We can't find any tweets from him about new handheld Playdate, weirdly



"[Lootboxes] are what we look at as **'surprise mechanics'** ... they're quite ethical and fun and enjoyable to people."

EA's vice president of legal and government affairs, **Kerry Hopkins**, gives a parliamentary committee a masterclass in spin



"**I wish Sony was here.** E3 is not as good when they're not here."

We agree entirely, Xbox boss **Phil Spencer**, but are you really supposed to say that sort of thing out loud?

"**Team-killing is for assholes**, and talking shit to your own team members is some super asshole shit."

One of many highlights from **Ice-T**'s video on online etiquette. His bit on misogyny suggests he's come a long way since his early album covers



Getty/Theo Wargo

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene

Hardware Voxon Z3D
Manufacturer Voxon Photonics

How appropriate that, in a month where we put a Star Wars game on the cover, some hardware appears which could play a decent game of Dejarik, the chess-like game played on the Millennium Falcon during A New Hope. First unveiled at last year's Tokyo Game Show but now available for purchase, Voxon Z3D is that rarest of things in 2019: an arcade cabinet the likes of which we've never seen before.

The fourplayer cocktail-style cabinet uses volumetric lighting to create, essentially, 3D holograms inside its central dome. The system projects individual slices of light at 4,000 frames per second onto a moving screen, and the naked eye parses the results as a single 3D image, without the need for any head-mounted peripherals.

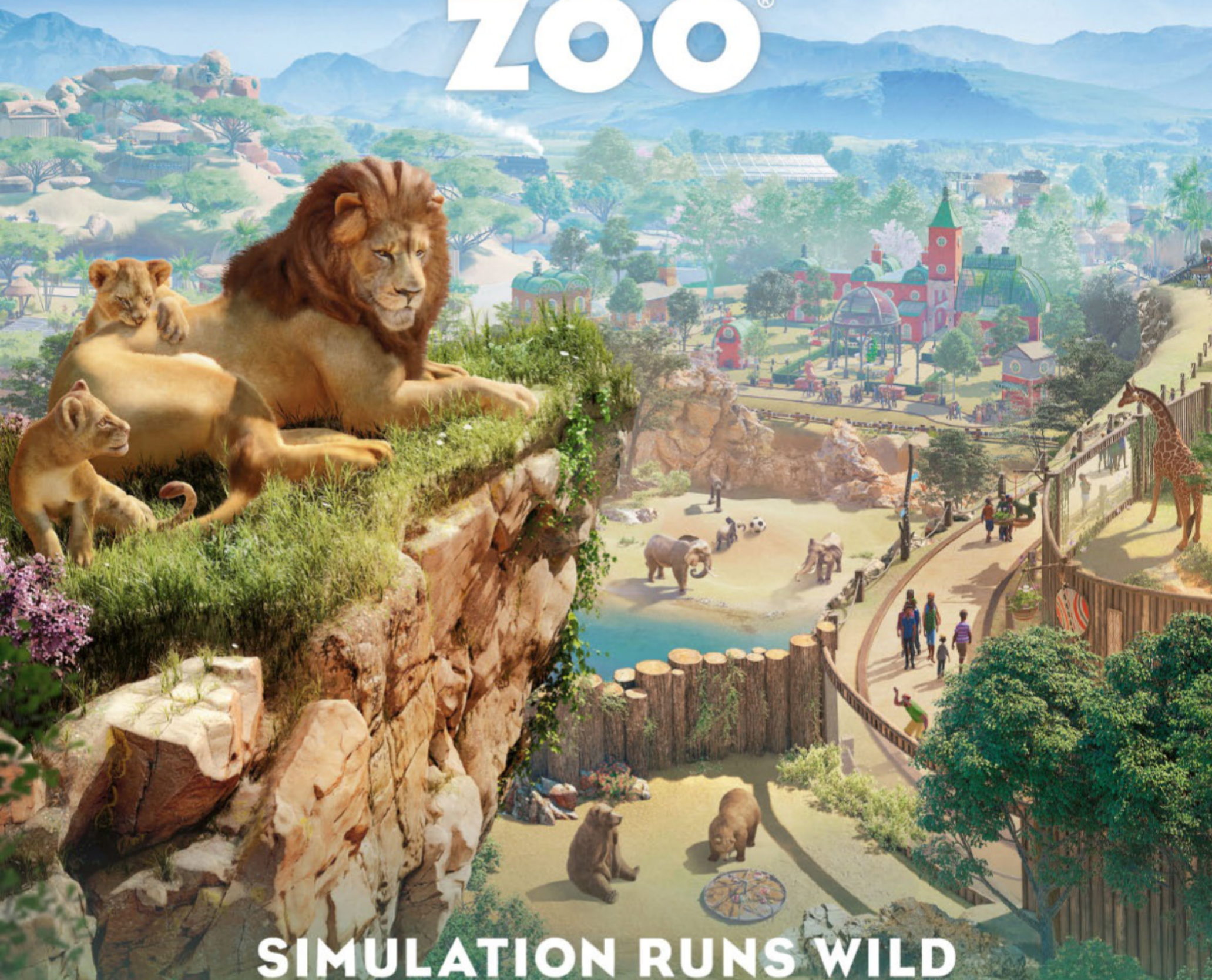
Four pieces of software come pre-installed. *Snaketron Z* is an "eat-'em-up" in which four players race after pellets to grow the longest serpent, while *Super Turrets* is a multiplayer tank shooter. *Balls For Dinner (Again)* riffs on Hungry Hungry Hippos, your avatar growing the more you eat. Also included is Voxatron, a voxel-based virtual console from Pico-8 maker Lexaloffle Games. New games can be loaded remotely as they are released, and you can make your own using a bundled Unity SDK.

While it's been designed for home use, Voxon says it is open to a possible coin-op version in future, if there's sufficient interest. However, we suspect price may be a factor – it's only available on application – and scarcity is another issue, with the firm currently planning on limiting production to just 500 units.





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My Favourite Game

Sam Vogel

The future bass pacemaker known as Jauz on Halo montage music, Kingdom Hearts and Overwatch's EDM potential

Sam Vogel is a DJ and producer from California who has secured a reputation for high-energy variety sets that light up festivals across the globe. His breakout single *Feel The Volume* launched via Diplo's label Mad Decent in 2014, and since then he's collaborated with Skrillex, Marshmello and DJ Snake, released a studio album and founded his own record label, Bite This. Here, he talks about portable MMOs, Basshunter's gaming links, and roadside breakdowns.

What's your earliest memory of games?

When my little brother was born – he's like, three, almost four years younger than me – for whatever reason, I don't know why, but my parents decided that they would get me a Nintendo 64. And they prefaced it like my little brother who had just been born had brought a Nintendo 64 with him. I was four at the time, so I tried to play *Zelda* and it was so complicated for my little brain. If you think about it, *Zelda* was really the first open-world RPG on a console like that – I didn't understand that you could just go anywhere.

We understand you're a big *Kingdom Hearts* fan. What does that series mean to you as an electronic producer?

Simple And Clean holds such an emotional place in my heart. I think it was probably 2014 or 15 – I was driving from San Francisco back down to LA with my wife. It's a pretty long drive so we put on a couple of BBC Essential mixes and one of them was Porter Robinson. In the middle, he played Simple And Clean and I almost stopped

CHAIN CHOMP Sam is gearing up for his European festival appearances, with spots at Creamfields and South West Four in August, where he's headlining his own stage. "The UK definitely feels like a second home, so when I get to do cool stuff like curate my own stage or come and play crazy shows over here it means a lot to me." Outside of that, Vogel's label Bite This is releasing another 'Off the Deep End' compilation in late July which features two new Jauz tracks. "It's a bit of a departure for me, deeper, techier kind of stuff that I wouldn't normally make and release as Jauz."



driving and had a full emotional breakdown. My wife was so confused! I feel kinda guilty as I've played the first three hours of *Kingdom Hearts III* but I haven't really dove back into it. I don't know, maybe I grew up?

Skrillex recently worked on Face My Fears with Utada Hikaru for *KHIII*. What would be your dream videogame series to compose music for?

I mean, it would have been *Kingdom Hearts*, so Sonny already took that one. But the main game I focus on right now is *Overwatch*, and I think there's a lot of cool opportunities especially with a character like Lucio who is literally a DJ. I've been very lowkey talking to Blizzard about it – not anything serious, just throwing ideas around. There are actually a lot of us in the DJ world who all happen to play *Overwatch* – it's me, Zedd, Slander, GTA and like seven other guys that consistently play all the time.

There's some sort of videogame influence behind every electronic musician, it seems.

I would agree. My earliest influences that were subconscious are definitely from videogames. I remember spending so many late nights in summer with my friends when I was young, blasting Basshunter and playing *WOW* for 12 hours in a row. He was such an anomaly back then – he had a song called DOTA. All of his videos were about him being a

gamer and throwing crazy parties and I was like, all right, I'm down with this guy.

Not even just inside of videogames, but in terms of being part of that culture – at the beginning of YouTube, there was a lot of that, people making *Halo* or *WOW* montages, and it was always electronic music in the background.

Do you still find time to play games?

I have a gaming laptop that I'll bring on the road, but the odds that I'll have enough time to sit down and play on some good Wi-Fi, it's just so rare. It sucks to say but it's almost impossible to properly

play on the road like that. I'll try my best normally with a therapeutic MMO – not something where I can be lagging. Once you start playing *Overwatch* at home at a certain competitive level you set your standard so high that it's not worth

playing any more!

What's your favourite game of all time?

I mean if we're going off most time spent, probably *Halo 2*? That's like when people ask me if I have a favourite artist. But I guess I'm gonna go with *Kingdom Hearts* – that game was so sentimental to me. I loved *Final Fantasy VIII* and *X* but when I was younger the aesthetic and gameplay were a little too mature – *Kingdom Hearts* had realtime combat and as a kid, I didn't want to sit there waiting to use attacks, I just wanted to spam the buttons. I feel like that game really led me on to a lot of the things that I've done in life. ■



This, we're assured, is a prearranged photoshoot in a scrapyard, and not taken in the aftermath of an accident caused by the music of *Kingdom Hearts*

STREAMING

Antstream Arcade bit.ly/antstream

Now in early access, Antstream Arcade lets you play over 400 officially licensed classic titles on a range of devices (Mac, PC, Xbox One, Android, Nvidia Shield and Amazon Fire Stick, with other platforms coming soon) with features such as challenges and leaderboards, for a fee of £7.99 a month. This is the 'Netflix for games' model we assumed Stadia was going for (we now know you'll have to buy games individually, on top of paying to stream). There are knots to unpick for the team of industry vets: it's keen to compensate devs fairly, but tracking down retro game creators can prove tricky in 2019; sometimes, licensees are unaware they even own the rights. Still, we're glad to see someone making bold, quantifiable strides into a possible future of play – providing the early tech kinks are ironed out, anyway.



VIDEO

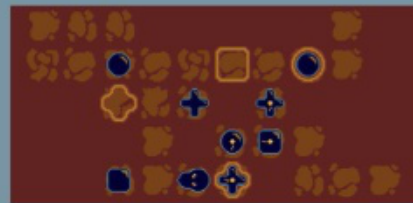
SGDQ 2019: Titanfall 2 bit.ly/titanfall2run

There were many standouts at this year's Summer Games Done Quick: the *Mario World* Kaizo relay, a *Tetris Effect* run so sublime that we (and the audience in the room) were on our feet by the end. But Bryonato's showcase of *Titanfall 2*'s gorgeous movement deserves recognition. Glitches are fun, but it's a treat to see such assured command of a skill-based game, pushing the systems to their limits and beyond. He's informative and entertaining, looks like he's having a blast, and pulls off a hilarious final boss strat that must be seen to be believed.

WEB GAME

The Tail Of The Serpent bit.ly/tailserpent

Part-Snake, part-Sokoban, *The Tail Of The Serpent* is an astonishingly elegant little puzzle game in which you use your body (some of it made up of the food you collect) to fill all of the goal spaces in a level. It was made by Lucas Salafranca, aka Le Slo, for Ludum Dare 44, whose theme was 'your life is currency'. In the first few levels it appears as simple as its minimal art style, as you work out how to collect various-shaped pieces of yourself in the correct order and shimmy around into the correct configuration. But things start to get complex as Le Slo wordlessly introduces new mechanics – the ability to drop off parts of your tail, lizard-like, and later, how you might be able to align yourself in order to push blocks around. It's very clever stuff: we only wish there were more of it.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

ACCESSORY

Satisfye Pro Gaming Grip bit.ly/satisfyegrip

Never before have we known we wanted something after just ten seconds of holding it (and Team Edge has three children). But following a ludicrously short *Dead Cells* session with Satisfye's handheld Switch grip, all of Edge's E3 team have bought – at least – one for themselves. It sports an asymmetrical design that simply repositions your right hand closer to its natural resting position, negating the awkwardness of the right Joy-Con's thumbstick. It's well worth the £28, shipping included: we're not sure how we ever played without it. If you want to carry it around, however, we'd recommend getting the Slim version of the case, which is tricky enough to squeeze into a backpack already.

continue

Crowd pleaser

Days Gone gets a specific Horde mode – all it ever needed, really

Quick bucks

SGDQ 2019 raises a record-breaking \$3,003,889 for charity

It's alive

The full Telltale's *The Walking Dead* series is coming to PS4 and Xbox One

Scale up

Apex Legends' second season adds loot box-hoarding dragons

quit

Shitlist

A Steam summer sale oversight has indies hemorrhaging wishlists

Boxing-day blues

E3 is over, but our wallets, waistlines and livers are some way from recovery

Horror story

Following *Devotion*'s ban in China, its publisher has had its business licence revoked

Pare back

Anyone know how to stop a five-year-old bleating on about *Mario Maker 2*?



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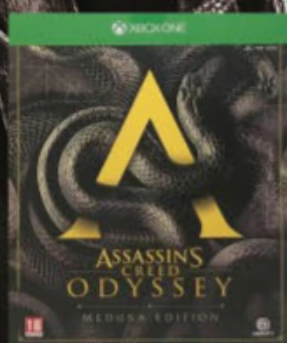
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DISPATCHES

SEPTEMBER



Issue 334

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month, if we pick one, wins a year's sub to PlayStation Plus, courtesy of Sony Interactive Entertainment



PlayStation®Plus

How deep is your love?

When your big rival pulls out of a race before you even get to the start line, it's hard to know how you can possibly measure victory, even if you finish first. That is exactly what Sony did to Microsoft this E3 – the Japanese giant's decision to skip E3 for a year attempting to undermine the impact of the Xbox Briefing by stealth. What Sony seemingly didn't realise, however, was how its no-show would essentially present Xbox One as the default home for all the big releases this year, whether they were multiplatform or not.

Watching PlayStation's social media accounts on both sides of the Atlantic spend hours after Microsoft's E3 bonanza frantically clarifying that title after title revealed on the Xbox stage would also be coming to Sony's machine was a sight to behold. Whereas in past years Xbox detractors have belittled the fact that many of the big games showcased during Microsoft's event have also been bound for PS4 (some, like *Kingdom Hearts III* last year, given spots during both the Xbox and PlayStation briefings), the lack of a counter-performance by Sony played out like a snub to all of its thirdparty publishers. The likes of *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order* from EA, *Dying Light 2* from Techland and *Tales Of Arise* from Bandai Namco had no choice as to where to display their wares – it was Xbox, or nothing.

Indeed, playing its new-found role of matriarch was one Microsoft appeared to relish and, combined with the Project Scarlett news, helped it convey Xbox as the platform with all the momentum at a time when – with Xbox One firmly in second place – it should have been playing second fiddle. If Sony thought declining its invitation to E3 would spoil the party, Microsoft proved it spectacularly wrong.

Keith Andrew

"Prior to the show, Microsoft promised it would 'go all out'. I feel it didn't"

It's a worrying sign from Sony, as we've already covered in Knowledge. Success in this industry is often a question of momentum, and simply handing the advantage to your biggest rival on the eve of a new generation is a heck of a risk. It's one you sense Sony may come to regret.

Prose combat

This year's E3 was an odd one. With Sony absent, the limelight was fully focused on Microsoft. I did enjoy the Xbox conference, but I was left with some disappointment. Prior to the show, Microsoft promised it would 'go all out'. I feel it didn't. Yes, it showed off heavy-hitters such as *Halo* and *Gears*, but those are known quantities. Where were some new announcements from all the studios Xbox has acquired in the last year? Where was the heavily rumoured *Fable* revival? Even the reveal of the next-gen system Project Scarlett was a disappointment. They just told us what Sony had already announced in an interview with Wired.

The most impressive game for me that came out of E3 was *Watch Dogs Legion*. I wasn't biggest fan of the first two *Watch Dogs* games, but *Legion* has me on board. The setting of London is awesome – though I might be biased as I am from the UK. 'The recruit any NPC' idea is extremely ambitious and if pulled off, will make the game a hit. The only worry I have for it is the narrative. *Watch Dogs* and *Watch Dogs 2* in my opinion had uninspiring storytelling, and with no main protagonist in *Legion*, it may be difficult to attach to any of the characters.

My biggest disappointment from E3 was *Marvel's Avengers* from Square Enix. I was a huge fan of *Marvel's Spider-Man* last year, and prior to the show was intrigued as to what Crystal Dynamics had been cooking up. From the gameplay that was shown, I was not impressed. The jokes didn't land,



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fellow **Edge** readers

the gameplay looked dull, and with a heavy emphasis on multiplayer and co-op play, I have lost a lot of interest in this game.

E3's future is uncertain. With big companies such as Sony and Activision pulling out, it's hard to say whether it will return to what it used to be.

Callum Jones

A lot of it is brinksmanship – we've heard an E3 booth can cost up to \$20 million. But we expect all this hard-headedness to soften once the big players have a new generation of consoles to sell. E3's not going anywhere.

If I ever feel better

Thanks for printing my letter to you, concerning excessive load times, in Issue 334 of your fine magazine. In it, I made the comment that the epilepsy warning at the start of *Division 2* was superfluous. You retorted it was really quite useful if you have epilepsy. I'm afraid I cannot disagree more.

To my mind, for any written warning to serve any purpose it has to inform the reader and offer them the opportunity to modify their behaviour as a result. For example, 'Mind the Step' informs the reader of the presence of the step and gives them the choice to take extra care when passing over it. But a warning to mind the step, by itself, would serve no purpose if there was no means by which one could traverse it safely.

The information imparted at the start of the *Division 2* is that the flashing lights in videogames can trigger seizures in a very small percentage of people. The opportunity that warning affords its reader to modify their behaviour is to: not play the game at all or restrict their gameplay in some way to minimise that risk. However, the warning does not provide information how to do the latter. What the player is encouraged to do is stop play if they feel unwell. Do we really need to be told that, in the event we start to feel unwell, we should stop playing?

Apparently, around four per cent of the population will develop epilepsy at some

point in their lives. For only about three per cent of those with epilepsy, flashing lights can trigger seizures. Flashing lights in games could affect just 0.0016 per cent of the population. There is a similar chance that Asteroid 2013 TV135 will hit Earth in 2032.

If you have diagnosed epilepsy, triggered by flashing lights, you will certainly be aware that videogames can cause you to suffer seizures. You will be told of this when the diagnosis is made and attempts are made to isolate the cause of your seizures. As a result, the warning is superfluous to you.

If you do have epilepsy triggered by flashing lights, but are unaware of that fact, the warning at the beginning will not stop you playing. You don't know that you are at risk and so the warning will not affect your behaviour.

The only possible influence the warning might have on anyone's behaviour is that if you suffer a seizure or begin to feel unwell, it might cause you to link the two events and conclude that you might have epilepsy. I would have thought, though, that, whilst correlation is not necessarily causation, it would have been fairly obvious that the thing you were doing when you felt unwell might have caused it.

And remember, this is going to effect just 0.0016 per cent of the population. More people voted for The Monster Raving Loony Party in the 1992 General Election. So, the warning is superfluous. Do I need to spend 25 seconds reading this warning every time the game starts?

That said, I suspect the root causes of all this time wasting are lawyers, the fear of being sued and a fear of a social media backlash. Those are, however, the subject of another email for another time.

Simon Brindle

We're sorry if we came off as somewhat glib in our reply to you last issue. We're afraid there's only so much nuance you can fit into a three-line response. Or four, in this case.

Too young

My dad's not much like Kratos. He doesn't have washboard abs; if he got his hands on an axe,

he'd be more liable to hurt himself than anyone else; and I think we'd end up lost and hungry if we went on a trek through the wilds. Yet Kratos is in a long line of violent, competent, protective dads in gaming. The trope of a grizzled father figure is firmly established. The only thing that's changing is the beards are getting longer.

What a relief then to see the E3 trailer for *Fall Guys*, the colourful Takeshi's Castle-like in which you compete with 100 players to navigate an assault course in a bid to become the one contestant to reach the end. It's never explicitly said that these contestants are dads, but you can tell from the opening seconds of the trailer. It's all in the run.

The dad run is well-documented. It's a heavy-footed faster-than-a-walk-slower-than-a-jog perambulation with a great deal of arm activity. The arms alternately come across the chest in a clenched fist, like the hands are working levers that motor the legs forward. You can see it in the wild whenever dads chase after toddlers that have got away from them at the playground. The E3 trailer for *Fall Guys* opens with a crowd of contestants all running towards the camera exhibiting a textbook dad-run.

What follows then is a whole new form of gaming dad. This dad isn't protecting; they're elbowing the other contestants into danger in a desperate attempt to get ahead on the leaderboard. They're certainly not wise: the dads are huffing their way headfirst into the rotating brushes of a car wash. And, best of all, there's not a grizzly beard in sight. These dads are smooth and swollen like a colourful jelly bean, and they move with the stubborn determination of a middle-aged man approaching the test-your-strength machine at a church fête.

I don't know about you, but this representation of fatherhood is more recognisable to me than the stoic killers found in other games.

Julian Benson

It's possible to be past your best, overweight and awkward and have a beard, you know. So we're told, anyway. ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

As it solves old problems, information technology always creates new ones. The rise in wide accessibility of nutritional science (or pseudoscience), for example, has fuelled the growth of ‘orthorexia,’ or an unhealthy obsession with eating as healthily as possible. Orthos is the Greek for right or correct: etymologically, ‘orthopaedics’ means ‘correct education’ and ‘orthography’ means ‘correct writing.’ The latest such construction is orthosomnia: an obsession with getting optimum sleep.

Now, sleep being perhaps the greatest consolation there is for being alive on this planet, orthosomnia doesn’t seem particularly worrying. But thanks to newfangled sleep-tracking devices, some customers end up referring themselves to sleep clinics not because they feel unrested, but because their trackers are telling them that they are not getting enough. One doctor, Alanna Hare, told the Guardian that she was increasingly seeing people “who probably didn’t have a problem until they started to become overly focused on their sleep”.

Essentially, such gadgets have gamified sleep – and gamification is neoliberalism’s strategy for introducing competition and point-scoring into previously uncompetitive activities, so as to brainwash us into imagining that we ‘enjoy’ our labour, that we are having fun while we are being exploited. The most transparently sinister recent case of this comes from Amazon, which now encourages its warehouse workers to compete against each other in ‘games’ called things like MissionRacer and CastleCrafter. “The company said it doesn’t monitor game results or penalise workers for not participating,” the Washington Post reported. “However, warehouse workers are tracked carefully for speed, efficiency and other factors, and those who underperform can be fired or reassigned.” *Shenmue* let you drive a forklift truck in a warehouse as a kind of meditative pretend labour. Now people working in actual warehouses find their work



By explicitly gamifying slumber, *Pokémon Sleep* aims to turn sleep into yet another task to be accomplished

turned into a pseudo-game so that their employers can extract more work from them.

But sleep isn’t labour – not yet. It is a dissident, rebellious activity, itself perfectly unproductive. In Jonathan Crary’s excellent 2013 book *24/7: Late Capitalism And The Ends Of Sleep*, indeed, he argues that sleep is inherently anti-capitalist, and is therefore under concerted assault in the modern age. So in the public discourse the purpose of sleep has been reimagined: once a reward of restful liberty at the end of a working day, sleep is now a morally necessary preparation for the next working day. Hence our new

public sleep sages such as Arianna Huffington – who could afford to sleep 24 hours a day if she wanted to – tell the rest of us peons that we should manage our sleep better because then we will be more “productive” at work. It is only a matter of time before some corporation demands mandatory sleep-tracking of its employees, and docks pay for late nights out.

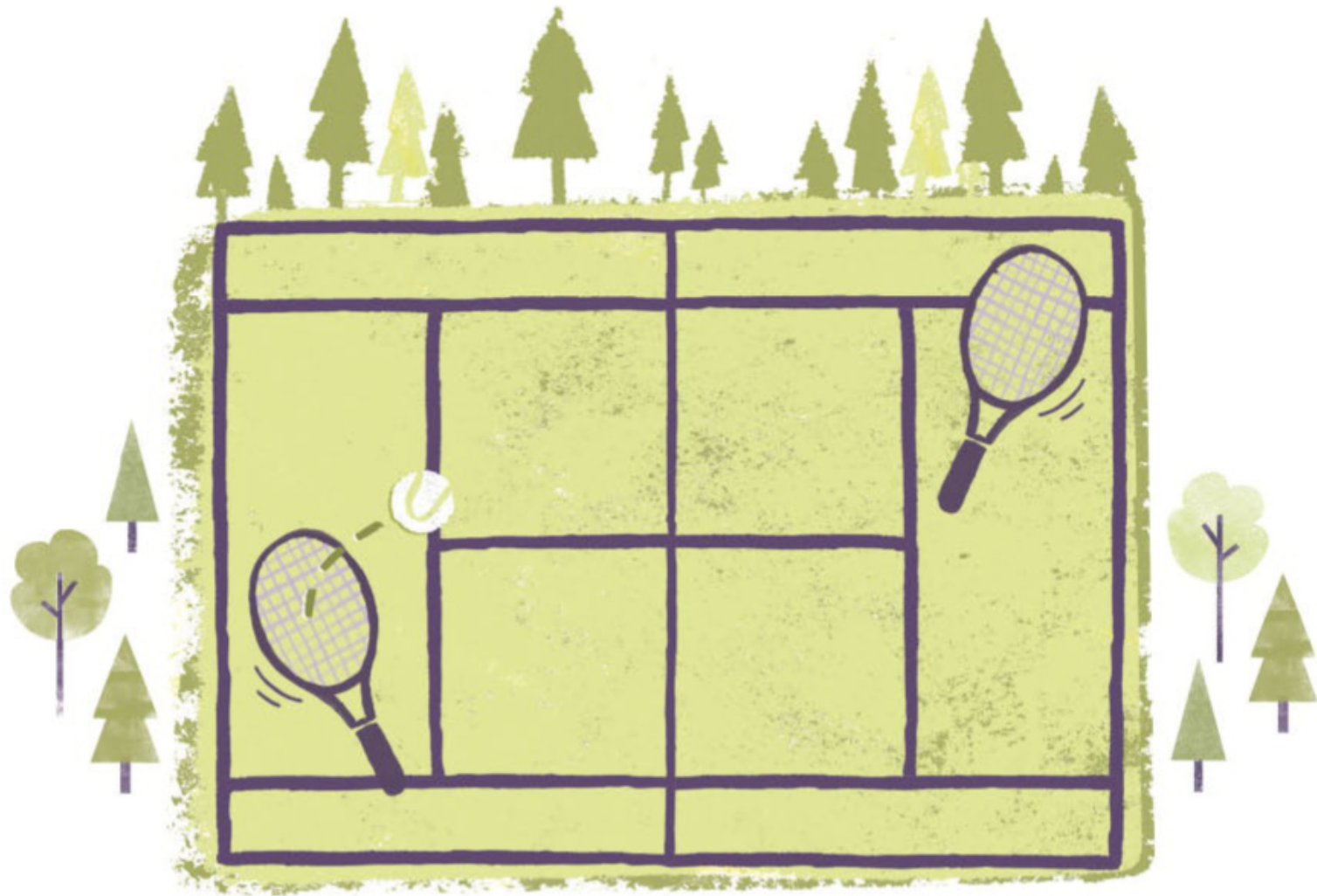
In this context, the release next year of *Pokémon Sleep* can’t help but come as disheartening news. The game, the official announcement explains, will track the player’s sleep and use the time spent sleeping, and the time the player wakes up, to affect the next session of gameplay once the data is beamed to one’s smartphone. Not much more about what the game will involve has yet been vouchsafed, but the developers claim it will “turn sleep into entertainment” – as if dreams are not interesting by themselves, or as if a night of perfectly dreamless sleep is not a welcome escape.

By explicitly gamifying slumber, *Pokémon Sleep* aims to turn sleep into yet another task to be accomplished. And by doing so, it may prove positively unhealthy. Because the problem with sleep-tracking technology, Alanna Hare explained, is that it turns sleep into a thing we must try to do. “A hallmark of insomnia,” she said, “is ‘effortful’ sleep, or trying to get to sleep, and that is what will happen if you become overly focused on getting eight hours and a particular type of sleep. It can cause a problem that was never there in the first place.”

Other videogames have, after all, treated sleep in a far more humane, and even poetic way. In *Animal Crossing* on DS, you ended a play session by putting your character to bed, and the feeling that he or she was peacefully sleeping until the next time you opened the game was a lovely fiction – but one that was true to the nature of sleep as a retreat from the world of effort and relentless events.

Steven Poole’s *Trigger Happy 2.0* is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net

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NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

Last month I rather rashly promised that while at E3 I'd keep an eye out for any little harbingers of a bigger change to come – the sort of thing you only spot if you're in a certain place at a certain time, and looking in roughly the right direction. There are, I now realise, two problems with that. First, I'm not sure I saw any, really. Second, and this sort of explains the first, is that you can't tell if something's a portent of some kind of disruption until said disruption has actually, you know, happened, and that might not come to pass for years. The whole thing was a bust, really. I can only apologise.

But! This was probably my favourite E3 so far, mostly because I've now been going for so long that I am gradually finessing my approach to it as I go. I would love to reference videogames here and call this min-maxing, but a) there's a long way still to go so we're nowhere near 'max' and b) it's been seven years, for pity's sake, and there's very little 'min' about that. If anything I'm mid-midding. Is that a thing? It should be.

The biggest and best change I made this year was to stay downtown, a mere eight-minute walk from the convention centre. It's something I've always resisted, believing that being able to get a bit of distance from the show would do me good. In previous years that's certainly been the case – I somehow ended up in a suite at the Beverly Hills Hotel a few years back, which rather took the sting out of being on deadline and having to stay indoors every night working. But LA traffic is the pits, and the ESA's decision in 2017 to let the public attend E3 has made getting out of the area at the end of the day a nightmare. Being walking distance away was a revelation.

And in a fortuitous turn of events, so was everyone else. All my dinners, drink-ups and parties were within walking distance of the hotel, save for one evening where I sat in an Uber for ten minutes with a driver who used to play *Super SFII Turbo* competitively (thanks, Cameron!). Previous years have seen me criss-crossing the city – downtown all



If I saw anything that hinted at the future of E3, it's that it will be progressively less and less defined by the show floor

day then drinks in Koreatown, dinner in Hollywood and back to the hotel in Beverly Hills – but this was a breeze.

I did, I must stress, also attend the convention. This finally felt like the year when the industry came to terms with E3 now being open to the public. I only had a handful of appointments on the show floor, with most of the action taking place in quiet, air-conditioned meeting rooms along the upper concourse. I had a handful of appointments offsite, too, including a couple of top-secret ones in my actual hotel room. I am not being mucky: when you're that close

to the convention centre, it turns out, people will come to you. If I saw anything that hinted at the future of E3, it's that it will be progressively less and less defined by the show floor, and instead spread to its borders and beyond. But who knows? I've been wrong before, I'm sure.

Instead I'd like to turn, if you'll indulge me, away from the future of E3 and towards the future of this page. This will be the final instalment of Big Picture Mode. I originally agreed to take on this column for six months, maybe a year, just trying it on to see how it fitted. I was a bit wary about putting myself, headshot and all, in a magazine that didn't run a single staff byline for almost two decades, and that still kept most of the magazine anonymous, attributed only to the hive. But I guess it went pretty well. This, somehow, is column number 70. Big Picture Mode first appeared in E266, the issue with the Xbox controller and the word 'HELP' overlaid on the face buttons. That was more than five years ago.

A lot has happened since, and not just within the industry. Seventy months ago I was **Edge's** games editor, in charge of the review and preview sections on a magazine with nine full-time staff. Today I am its editor, and there are only four of us. Longevity is a curse, too: one former **Edge** columnist told me that, towards the end, he'd have an idea then spend two hours flicking through back issues because he couldn't remember if he'd written about it before, and I'm starting to see his point. Most importantly of all, I think it's time for a fresh voice. If you're in the industry and have something to say – and ideally, if you're not an old white dude who's going to spend every other month moaning about his kids – please get in touch. Anyway, that's it from me. This has been one of the highlights of a career I never thought I'd have. Thanks so much for reading.

*Nathan Brown is **Edge's** editor and, yes, he's kicking himself for not doing this last month instead*



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ALEX HUTCHINSON

Hold To Reset

Building a new game, a new studio and a new life from the ground up

Another E3 is finished and already merging in my mind with all the previous iterations like some kind of interactive monster. This one felt particularly long, since video interviews have now been replaced almost entirely by streaming shows. The positive side of this is long chats where I felt we could get more into the meat of what we're trying to achieve, instead of answering superficial questions. The bad part is finishing at 10pm every night after a day on the show floor. Not that I'm complaining! Quite the opposite. It has been incredibly satisfying to get the game to the point where we can pass a controller to rooms filled with journalists and watch them play it.

So what did six days of relentless presentations get us? While writing down our critique of the week, you'll be excited to learn potential failure comes in many flavours. Did we communicate the strengths of our game clearly? Did the press see the value in the big features we're trying to build? Did we get enough coverage online? Did players engage with the coverage? Does the humour in *Savage Planet* translate into other languages? On that topic, does anyone else find it hilarious that the in-game Kindred computer looks like it runs on a version of Windows 95, complete with awful icons?

It's tough to assess, as obviously nobody will answer you directly during the show, meaning you are left to sift through each article, video or interview for specific insight. If you pay close attention you can usually see the seeds of what will become the biggest issues in reviews and player feedback down the track. Luckily our build was very stable, we only crashed once, nobody threw their controller down in disgust and most people stayed for the entire hour they had to play.

Better still, when the time came to put down their thoughts, the humour was well-received in contrast to the serious games all around us, and people seem to be warming to the idea of a 'deeply finishable' game. Spared from the corporate mandate to ensure 1,000



It's important for us to make sure everyone realises that we are not trying to compete with our triple-A brethren

hours of play with a side-salad of multiplayer, our push for a game that respects your time and avoids padding seemed to resonate. Which is a relief, because there's nothing we can do about it at this point. Games remain the only medium where 'value for money' remains a concern in reviews, and although I'm sure brevity will be an issue for some players, hopefully there are enough looking for something different, funny and focused.

Taking three days of notes on the various playthroughs reminded us of all the missing or unfinished elements in the game: our grass and some of our vegetation doesn't look alien

enough so we need to play with the post-process colours and add some more oozing and moving stuff; the backtracking pass on the level design side is incomplete, meaning they sometimes arrived at points in the map where we will be hiding secondary challenges or collectibles which don't yet exist; we don't highlight our backstory enough, and even though it's an open exploration game where we want players to find the story nuggets, we need to put in more.

But the only major concern that is baked into the game, meaning we can't build a plan to change it, is how the scope and style of our game 'fits' in the current gaming landscape and what that means for our eventual reception. It can often feel like reviews are as much about expectations as they are about the game itself, so it's important for us to make sure everyone understands our goals and realises that we are not trying to compete with our triple-A brethren in either scope or price. We obviously will not survive a 1:1 comparison with the current genre leaders, so we need to be different and fresh.

This has been harder than expected to communicate, perhaps because *Savage Planet* looks much closer to those big games than a traditional indie title, meaning we should maybe have pushed a more esoteric visual direction. Or maybe it's because the history of most of the team is in those bigger games, which has created an expectation. Regardless, we'll continue to iterate that it's not full price and it's meant to exist alongside those games, not compete with them directly.

Our worst-case review situation at this point would be a list of all the ways it isn't *Call Of Duty* or *Far Cry*, ignoring the price point and the radically different ambitions. It's information we'll roll up, assess and take into the plan for Gamescom, where if we get comparisons it'll hopefully be like the outlet who called us '*Far Cry Junior*'. It made me chuckle. I can live with that.

Alex Hutchinson is co-founder of Montreal-based Typhoon Studios. He can be found on Twitter at @BangBangClick

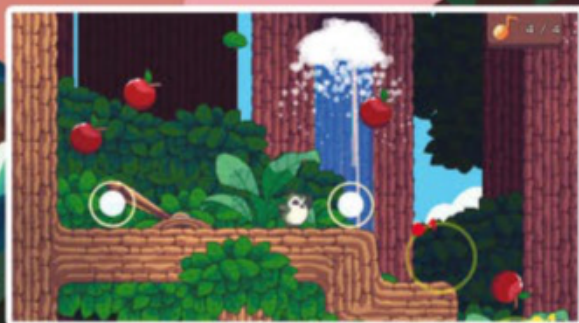
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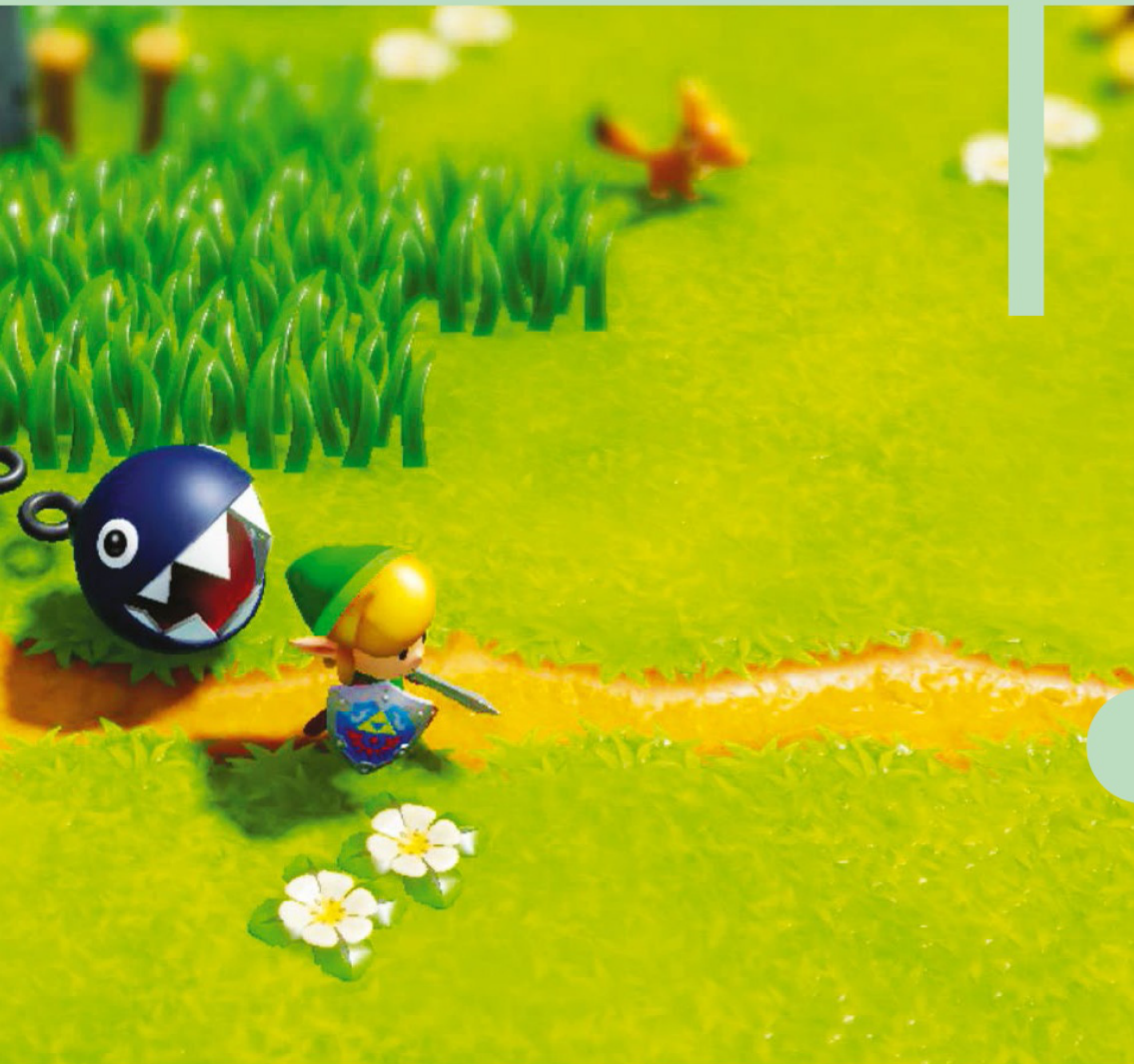


THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: LINK'S AWAKENING

Developer Grezzo **Publisher** Nintendo **Format** Switch **Release** September 20

Fittingly, it feels like a half-remembered dream. Granted, a lack of sleep does tend to make your memory pretty fuzzy. But as we play through the opening of Grezzo's remake of the Game Boy favourite, it all starts flooding back. Waking up in Marin's house. The owl. The Octoroks. Pushing urchins with your shield. Grabbing your sword from the beach. The cave with the cracked floor. Trading the

mushroom for magic powder to sprinkle on that pesky raccoon. Sure, the crane game in Mabe Village might now have realistic physics, but our unfortunately limited time with this E3 build is summed up by that Chain Chomp tethered outside. What was once a startling surprise – a *Mario* staple in a *Zelda* game? – now prompts little more than a nod of recognition.



That's not a problem for those new to *Link's Awakening*, of course, and it's early days – we've barely entered Tail Cave before the demo tells us our time's up. Besides, the new look is lovely; the plasticky toy-town sheen makes characters look like sentient Amiibo (you'd suspect it was a marketing ploy if Link weren't the only accompanying figurine) and the tilt-shift effect softens everything around the edges of the screen. It has, however, come at a cost. This isn't the first Nintendo game we've played with performance issues at the preview stage – this sort of thing is usually tightened up near the end of development – but it seems the extra effects have taken their toll on the framerate.

We're mildly concerned about what the control changes mean for combat, too. While the Game Boy's two buttons forced you to make tough decisions on what kit to equip, the extra slots here mean you can

keep your shield handy at all times, and still have room for other items. Moblin attacks are easily blocked, with a couple of swift slashes enough to finish them off. Still, we need only look to how *A Link Between Worlds* built upon its SNES predecessor to see how you can offer more control without toning down the challenge too much.

Elsewhere, the new Chamber Dungeon feature lets you assemble custom labyrinths from the rooms you've cleared, even if it's hardly the *Zelda Maker* for which some have been clamouring. Otherwise, it all feels a little safe – you'd think a game that was defined by its weirdness would demand more than a straight remake. After the game-changer that was *Breath Of The Wild* and with *Cadence Of Hyrule* offering a rhythmic twist on the top-down *Zelda* formula, can this (admittedly delightful-looking) throwback really cut it?



GEARS 5

Developer The Coalition **Publisher** Xbox Game Studios **Format** PC, Xbox One **Release** 2019

We're starting to understand why *Gears 5* dropped the 'Of War'. The Coalition might insist it makes the name snappier, but as the emotionally charged trailers keep coming, we suspect it may have something to do with distancing the game from Sony Santa Monica's reinvention of *God Of War*. That, too, was a series about a burly fellow ripping corpses in half, before the 2018 instalment chose to focus less on the hows, and more on the whys, of its bloodthirstiness.

Gears 5 is transparently setting itself up to attempt the same. The latest cinematic trailer sees Kait Diaz struggling against the ghostly faces bursting from within her own. They're the nightmares – visions, perhaps – brought on by her grandmother's Locust symbol amulet, which, it's hinted, may eventually turn her into the enemy. It says much that The Coalition chose to focus on a tone-setting trailer this year. It's clearly desperate to prove that *Gears* can move beyond mere machismo and chainsaw guns – but, as we watch Diaz's face contorting to an eerie remix of Billie Eilish's *Bury A Friend* for a full minute-and-a-half, we can't help but pine for the gut-ripping of yore. Emotional growth is all well and good, but a bit of campaign gameplay wouldn't go amiss.

At least there was the confusingly introduced (pyrotechnics, wrestlers held hostage underneath

the stage) Escape mode, which not only provided some action but also a cathartic dose of Lil Jon rapping about AKs. Still, the threeplayer co-op mode looked rather generic – and so it proves in our demo. We're dropped into a dull-looking labyrinthine facility with two other players: we must work together to reach the exit before we're overcome by toxic gas and/or a swarm of AI enemies. Each of the characters has a passive and

ultimate ability that helps define their role. As the pacy Lahni, we play scout to our teammates' support and tank roles, charging ahead to scope out a route and stunning enemies with our ultimate. Her passive ability regularly drops extra supplies – crucial, as ammo is scarce, and isn't shared among players.

Then again, Keegan's ultimate ability also drops ammo, and his passive recharges it more quickly when he kills targeted enemies. And when you consider that Mac's passive also recharges his ultimate, the characters begin to become indistinct, and any promised tactical intrigue disappears. Still, this is the kind of classic cover-shooting action that series fans are more familiar with, and – alongside a pre-order bonus that lets you play as a chainsaw-gun-wielding Terminator – may placate enough of them to let The Coalition have its introspective moment in the campaign without too much complaint.

Clearly desperate
to prove that
Gears can move
beyond mere
machismo and
chainsaw guns



BLAIR WITCH

Developer/publisher Bloober Team **Format** PC, Xbox One **Release** August 30

The latest psychological horror from Polish studio Bloober Team had the unenviable task of opening for Keanu, meaning most people had forgotten about it five minutes later. The *Layers Of Fear* dev is a smart pick for this series, though if the trailer is anything to go by – and admittedly, E3 teasers are rarely known for their restraint – its approach seems more in keeping with Adam Wingard's disappointing 2016 sequel than the brilliant original, despite a visual nod to its chilling final scene.

Set in 1996, it follows Ellis, your archetypal ex-cop with a dark past, as he heads into the woods near Burkittsville with his dog, Bullet, to join the search for a missing nine-year-old boy.

He's got a camcorder, though the action seems to be viewed mostly through Ellis's eyes. Still, fans of shakycam will be delighted to see the sway as he breaks into a sprint towards a ramshackle cabin that is clearly not a sensible place to hide from the spindly figure pursuing him through the trees.

As we say, E3 isn't the place to go for subtlety, but the tricks used here seem terribly hackneyed: panicked breathing, a torch beam waving wildly, red flashes and sudden shrieks. In other words, expect the kind of cattle-prod scares and irritating chase sequences that blighted Bloober's most recent sequel. Perhaps *Layers Of Forest* would be a more appropriate title.



ONINAKI

Developer Tokyo RPG Factory **Publisher** Square Enix
Format PC, PS4, Switch **Release** August 22

The third title from Tokyo RPG Factory appears to have been developed through a less nostalgic lens than *I Am Setsuna* and *Lost Sphear*. The team that made those games has taken on some star power in the form of creative producer Takashi Tokita, director of *Parasite Eve* and *Chrono Trigger*. *Oninaki* marks the studio's first foray into the action-RPG genre, and ditches its predecessor's turn-based battles for realtime combat. Swathes are cut through groups of enemies in a single flurry in a battle system resembling an isometric *Nier: Automata*.

You are cast as Kagachi, a young 'watcher' charged with helping lost souls pass into the afterlife. He does so by passing between the Living World and the Beyond, and battles by summoning Daemons, which give the game its class system. Switchable in realtime, each has its own weapons and abilities.



DESTINY 2: SHADOWKEEP

Developer/publisher Bungie
Format PC, PS4, Stadia, Xbox One **Release** September 17

Throughout *Destiny's* life, it has been defined by what is coming next. Bungie launches an expansion, then players chew through it in days and ask what's for afters. That looks set to change. *Shadowkeep* is exciting enough in isolation, a return to the Moon that overhauls several major systems and adds class-specific finishing moves. Yet it's everything happening around it that's really got fans in a lather. The headline news is *Destiny 2: New Light*. Launching alongside *Shadowkeep*, it's a free-to-play parcelling up all of *D2's* first-year content plus a few extras, including Crucible multiplayer. The main game will be available on Stadia, the PC version is moving from Battlenet to Steam, and cross-save will be supported, which is manna from heaven for those of us who want to move over to PC but wouldn't play through the launch campaign again if you paid us.



LUIGI'S MANSION 3

Developer Next Level Games **Publisher** Nintendo **Format** Switch **Release** 2019

We were certain we'd miss *Dark Moon's* dinky dioramas. But two minutes in, we're having too much fun to care. Luigi's new Poltergust is powerful enough to smash ghosts against the ground, scenery, or even one another. On our second playthrough, we use this technique to expose a spectre hiding behind a shield; the first time around, we tug it aside with one of Luigi's seemingly infinite supply of plungers. These can also be used to pull out beams, revealing a secret room, or fired into a protruding cluster of bricks to open another hidden entrance.

When we've stopped ping-ponging cobs of bread off suits of armour and smashing barrels with melons, there are puzzles to

solve. Many involve Luigi's ability to produce an ectoplasmic doppelganger (better not to question the logistics of this) called Gooigi. Slurping safely through spike traps, he essentially allows you to be in two places at once – we set his Poltergust to blow, triggering a wind-powered lift for Luigi to descend in.

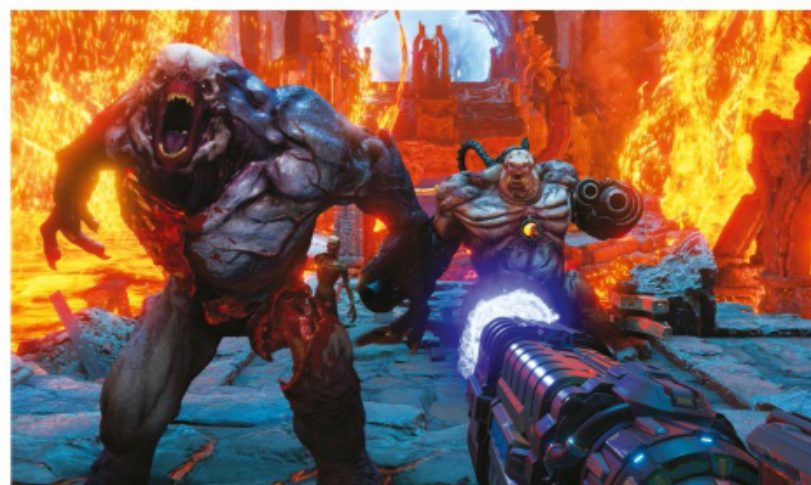
Among these entertaining gimmicks and gadgets, our quivering hero remains the greatest joy, tiptoeing timidly when the lights go out and pumping his fist in delight when he's cleared a room. It may have been built in Vancouver, but of its publisher's 2019's slate, Next Level Games has produced the game with the most generous dusting of Nintendo magic.



CONTRA: ROGUE CORPS

Developer Konami Digital Entertainment **Publisher** Konami
Format PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Release** September 24

A more appropriate title would have been *Contra: Versial*. The announcement of the return of Konami's run-and-gun shooter certainly raised eyebrows with its new twin-stick 3D action, fourplayer online co-op and robot panda. It looked like *Contra* at its most contrived, but we try not to knock things before we've tried them. So we try it. We play as humanoid bug Gentleman, moving him with the left stick and aiming with the right. When our laser overheats, we must switch to his alternate weapon, a short-range flamethrower. The dash stuns enemies – but there are far too few of them, and most of our time is spent trudging through ugly locales in search of something to point our sludgy shooters at. This may be about the furthest you could get from compelling *Contra*. Best stick to the recently released *Anniversary Collection*, perhaps.



DOOM ETERNAL

Developer Id Software **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks
Format PC, PS4, Stadia, Switch, Xbox One **Release** November 22

Eternal's glory kills are like catnip for the hyperactive masses at Bethesda's E3 conference, but this sequel to the 2016 reboot has more in its locker than the rush for gibbs. With double the number of enemy types, an expanded glory-kill system and a grappling hook that quickens the pace of combat and allows for more complex arena design, it looks to tax the grey matter as well as splatter it.

Id says it has learned from the mistakes it made in the design of the multiplayer mode that was bolted on to the 2016 release, which it admits lacked dynamism or even much of a meta. The Battle mode is clearly a response to that, pitting solo Doom Slayers up against two player-controlled demons. That, in turn, informs the invasion mechanic, which lets you enter other players' campaigns as one of the hell-beasts. As long as we get a shotgun, sign us up.



TELLING LIES

Developer Sam Barlow Publisher Annapurna Interactive Format PC Release Summer

Sam Barlow is gripping the mouse protectively. It's obvious why: in database-combing thriller *Telling Lies*, as in *Her Story* before it, a dramatic reveal is only ever a click or two away. Barlow has spent three years weaving an ambitious narrative puzzle, and he's loath for us to spoil it for ourselves – or indeed, our readers. And it's even more of a risk with his latest, thanks to a new mechanic that allows players to highlight a word or phrase in the subtitles for the live-action video scenes, then click to search and bring up every other clip in which it occurs.

And so, despite the game's release being just around the corner, we gladly let Barlow drive this one for us. First, he selects the word 'love' from a brief 'love you' at the end of a video call, and brings up another clip in which Halt And Catch Fire star Kerry Bishe sings a gentle folk song. In the next, the mood changes suddenly from sweet to voyeuristic: Angela Sarafyan of *Westworld* fame sits atop a gaudy bed and purrs "I love complicated men" into the camera. The uncanny ghost of our character's reflection on the in-game monitor shifts almost uncomfortably.

It's this viewpoint that gives *Telling Lies* its frisson without stepping over the line into seediness. "It's such a human desire to read people, hear their stories, to get in their heads, to learn about their lives," Barlow says. He

cites the way we've been trained to enjoy living vicariously through others' emotions from the game shows of the '50s up until modern reality TV, and voices his regret at not having asked his grandmother more about her own life story before she passed. "That's the itch that this kind of scratches." And even more so than *Her Story*, *Telling Lies* is designed to be satisfying on a tactile level. Barlow clicks and holds, then sways the mouse back and forth across the screen, conductor-like, rewinding and fast-forwarding clips. "This is our *Mario* jump," he says. "It is, in itself, fun. And then you're seeing stuff, jumping to new things instantly... I just wanted to free people up, I don't want people strip-mining clips and taking notes."

A pleasingly refreshed in-game set of tools – bookmarks, tags, that highlighting function – go hand-in-hand with Barlow's signature freeform, "open-world" storytelling methods. You take whatever free-associative path you want in any order, leads branching off into other leads; if you manage to solve a mystery ahead of time by inference alone, reading the actors' body language or picking up on verbal cues, then all the better. Barlow may currently have tight hold of the wheel, but once *Telling Lies* is in our hands, we fully expect the way in which videogame stories are traditionally told to quickly unravel with gorgeous, natural abandon.



SAYONARA WILD HEARTS

Developer Simogo **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive **Format** Switch **Release** 2019

The definition of 'magic' varies depending on who you ask. For some, it's a hobby for the socially awkward; for others, it's a wide-eyed belief long since put away with other childish things. For us, however, magic is a beautifully made videogame. And after half an hour with *Sayonara Wild Hearts*, it's clear Simogo's synth-pop sugar rush is exactly that.

As unlikely hero The Fool, we're upended from our bed and dumped through the skylight into an alternate universe – and onto a skateboard. This strange world is under siege from girl gangs representing Major Arcana tarot cards. Our job is to hunt them down and shatter their hearts.

We nudge the stick barely left and right to carve our skateboard around a midnight-blue Möbius strip, collecting neon hearts. Controls are pleasantly twitchy: The Fool smoothly adjusts her centre of gravity as we pirouette over ramps to rack up points to a synthy remix of Clair de Lune. This tutorial stage reveals one of *Sayonara Wild Hearts*' greatest tricks: its camera movements. By default, we hover just behind The Fool as she hurtles along – in the next moment, the view swings out to the side as we round a corner, or follows a loop-de-loop, the momentum rushing to our head.

It's this sleight of hand that makes *Sayonara Wild Hearts* so spellbinding: the showmanship of

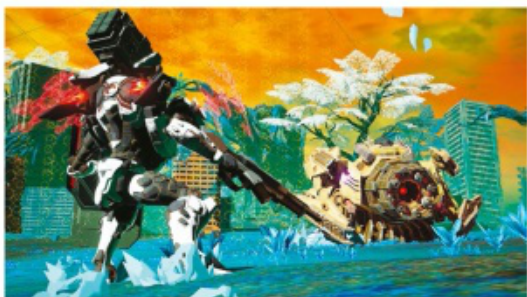
the camera and The Fool's giddy twirls, the racetracks that send us cartwheeling from one gravity to the next. Interactions boil down to stick nudges and a single button, but they're constantly recontextualised. We surf through portals in tunnels of love; play chicken with oncoming traffic on the back of a motorbike, half-riding, half-flying along boost pads; throw punches to the beat in a *Shenmue*-esque backstreet dance brawl. One

particular leap through the side of a tram (awarded 'Risky!') takes the breath away. Sometimes we combine it all, front-flipping over a fireball and landing on our bike before riding it into a chasm – then segueing into Superman-style flight.

It's not all real, of course. S-ranking levels test the reflexes (we spot hearts that require a quicker cross-track shimmy than we can

currently manage) and you're briefly punished for mistakes, splatting into walls before a rewind starts another run at an obstacle. Otherwise, you're simply a participant in a music video. But *Sayonara Wild Hearts* drives that exquisite racing line between skill and showmanship that makes you feel unstoppable. It's better than real – it's surreal, a motorbike ride down the rabbit hole, a synaesthetic rollercoaster that's Mizuguchi for millennials in the very best way. We walk away from our demo believing in magic all over again.

**Drives that
exquisite racing
line between skill
and showmanship
that makes you
feel unstoppable**



DAEMON X MACHINA

Developer Marvelous **Publisher** Nintendo
Format Switch **Release** September 13

We're not about to exhume that Miyamoto quote again, but Marvelous' mech action game has certainly benefited from being pushed back from Spring to September. Much has changed since February's Prototype Missions demo. There's now a difficulty modifier of sorts with a new piece of equippable tech that allows novice players to lock onto and track enemies more easily, while directional indicators for incoming fire are a vital addition given how busy the action gets. Bosses now have health bars, while you'll be warned if you stray beyond a mission's boundaries rather than being shunted back into play (and potentially into further trouble) while fighting around the fringes. With noisier impact effects, optional gyro aiming and a clearer visual distinction between friendlies and foes, Marvelous may have won over the doubters, us included.



FIRE EMBLEM: THREE HOUSES

Developer Intelligent Systems/Koei Tecmo **Publisher** Nintendo
Format Switch **Release** July 26

Fancy a bit of *Persona* in your *Fire Emblem*? Intelligent Systems has you covered, although this time you're setting the curriculum. As a professor at Garreg Mach Monastery, protagonist Byleth must arrange lesson plans for students to train them in melee, mounted and magical combat. Mealtimes, student-faculty mixers and festivities allow you to establish favourable pairings, while increasing their motivation to learn – useful when their goals conflict with your plans for them. You'll need to treat some students with kid gloves, while others respond better to firm critique; either way, you'll guide them towards their certification exams, where their character classes are established. Everything factors into a war that follows a five-year time jump – a gap, we suppose, that makes the idea of a teacher romancing their former students slightly less creepy.



CONTROL

Developer Remedy Entertainment **Publisher** 505 Games
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** August 27

Oddly enough, there wasn't much buzz around *Control*'s E3 show-floor demo: tucked away at the back of 505 Games' meeting room, it wasn't exactly screaming for attention. It left a strong impression on those who did stop by, however, revealing more about FBC director Jesse Faden's telepathic connection with her missing brother. It was largely the same collection of early-game superpowers we've seen before – telekinesis, a teleport-dodge, the energy shield – but there are many more tantalising hints at the mysteries swirling around the Oldest House. There are definitely some wobbly bits to tighten up before launch, but otherwise *Control* is looking ready to take the world by surprise; with Remedy having just reacquired the rights to *Alan Wake* from former publisher Microsoft, the Finnish developer's star is surely set to rise again.



ASTRAL CHAIN

Developer PlatinumGames **Publisher** Nintendo **Format** Switch **Release** August 30

Goodness knows why Nintendo opted for a hands-off showing of PlatinumGames' sci-fi actioner. Then again, its slow-paced investigative sections do appear to be little more than an appetiser for the good stuff. Looking at a print the size of a car, *Astral Chain*'s taskforce chief demonstrates his deductive expertise, growling, "We're not talking about a human hand."

Clues gathered, our rookie officers track and then engage the monstrous suspect in stylish, elastic combat. A baton for close-range attacks morphs into a handgun so you can chip away from range. Meanwhile, you can send out your Legion, a robotic weapon reminiscent of *Xenoblade Chronicles 2*'s

Blades, to attack automatically. The chain tethering you is key – you can yank the Legion towards you when an enemy takes a swing, or pull yourself to it to fight in tandem, launching synchronised attacks. Wrap the chain around enemies and you can temporarily hold them in place, leaving them vulnerable to backstab attacks, while you can grab the core of a weakened enemy (hello, *Revengeance*) to recover your Legion's stamina and heal yourself. With a Witch Time-esque dodge and a splash of *Nier: Automata*'s off-kilter humour in its kitten-tracking, litter-collecting asides, this feels thrillingly close to a PlatinumGames Greatest Hits package.



SCAVENGERS

Developer Midwinter Entertainment **Publisher** Improbable
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2019

While there's a suggestion of battle royale in Midwinter's hazardous, loot-filled map and thirdperson shooting, we're consistently busy in this survival game. Instead of biding our time until a hectic showdown, we're occupied from the get-go, fending off AI enemies and biting cold, and gathering resources to craft our character's special weapon (a kind of electric staff) and upgrade armour.

Instead of an enclosing ring, the threat is an icy tornado that whirls around the map. Our team of three often has to readjust course to avoid it, sometimes running into another group (usually hostile, although teams can work together to give themselves a better chance of making it to the goal of the spaceship). It looks generic, but with Improbable's cloud-based tech behind it and some smart mechanics, it's dynamic enough to have a shot at being Twitch's next darling.



AFTERPARTY

Developer/publisher Night School Studios
Format PC, Xbox One **Release** 2019

Night School's narrative bar crawl, in which friends Milo and Lola must outdrink the devil to escape hell, is still – apologies – making the rounds. We've seen this demo a couple of times before. It offers a taste of the questionable cocktails that unlock new dialogue options: one flares the temper, while another turns you into Satan's gift to demons, allowing you to deal with prickly social situations. A meter shows you how long your, er, enhanced state will last.

A closer look this year also reveals that the beer pong minigame is actually blood pong, with donations coming from the noisy chewers of the world. It's the kind of deft comic touch that has us practically gasping for a proper sit-down with the full shebang and an Old Fashioned. We hate to rush you, Night School, but we could always do with more excuses to drink.



SHENMUE III

Developer Ys Net **Publisher** Deep Silver **Format** PC, PS4 **Release** November 19

We've always been baffled by the furore over Epic Games Store exclusives: the outrage at a PC game requiring a launcher other than Steam presumably comes from people who keep all their food, crockery and cutlery in one cupboard. But the news that the PC version of *Shenmue III* will be exclusive to the *Fortnite* maker's storefront adds a wrinkle to the debate. When a game is funded through Kickstarter, does moving it from one store to another constitute a breach of terms? Some backers think so, but Deep Silver is batting away refund requests.

The fuss took the shine off *Shenmue III*'s playable debut, which depending on your viewpoint is either a curse or a

blessing. Series creator Yu Suzuki has seemingly spent the 18 years between *Shenmue II* and *III* with his fingers in his ears, ignoring what the rest of the industry has been up to before making a game that hews to his Dreamcast-era template. QTEs are everywhere in the game world's throwaway distractions, and the voice work is as endearingly clunky as ever. The finer details – the story and, as revealed in E330's cover feature, the need to get NPCs to trust you before they'll spill the beans – were never going to come out in a 15-minute demo. But Suzuki has clearly made the game he promised to. It is *Shenmue III*, with all that implies, and fans are duly enraptured.



CREATURE IN THE WELL

Developer/publisher Flight School Studio
Format Switch **Release** Summer

Yoku's Island Express proved the wisdom of combining pinball mechanics with Metroid-style exploration, and there's a hint of Nintendo-like craft and invention in this top-down hack-and-slash. Looking not unlike a cel-shaded *Hyper Light Drifter* (or a prettier version of *Travis Strikes Again*) and with a title that could easily belong to a forgotten '50s B-movie, it casts you as a robot venturing underground to activate a weather machine in order to dispel a vicious sandstorm. You'll whack an energy ball against bumpers to accrue enough power to open doors and activate various mechanisms, with weapons letting you split the ball in two, or slow down time to line up more precise shots. Meanwhile, glimpses of the titular beast – giant eyes flickering in the darkness, gargantuan arms pulling platforms downward – add to the eerie atmosphere.



WOLFENSTEIN: YOUNGBLOOD

Developer MachineGames **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks
Format PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Release** July 26

Feminist Frequency's annual survey of gender representation at E3 noted a dip this year in the proportion of games featuring female protagonists. *Youngblood* stands out from the crowd in that sense, at least, as two sisters reverse the old damsel cliché by setting out to rescue their poor old dad.

Whether MachineGames sticks the narrative landing remains to be seen, but there's not long to wait – *Youngblood* releases shortly after this issue lands on shelves. And there's plenty to be excited about besides, in particular the involvement of Bethesda stablemate Arkane. The *Dishonored* developer has helped broaden the scope of a *Wolfenstein* game's level design – an essential addition for a cooperative game, and particularly one featuring siblings. Tempers can fray, can't they?



PLANET ZOO

Developer/Publisher Frontier Developments **Format** PC **Release** November 5

In a meeting room above the noise of the LA Convention Center's West Hall, we find an oasis of calm. Last year, Frontier had one of the showiest booths of E3, the studio sparing no expense in its push for *Jurassic World Evolution*. This year, with *Planet Zoo* the headline act on the Frontier release slate, things are more restrained. Where all around us is blood and guts, Frontier shows CG big cats lolling around in the sun. While the show floor rolls out a succession of pop hits, wailing anime metal and EDM bangers, here Jim Guthrie's soundtrack calms the nerves. There is a supply of chilled water, and some oatmeal and raisin cookies we're still thinking about. It is heaven.

Frontier's setup is perfectly in keeping with *Planet Zoo*, by some distance the most laid-back, quietly contemplative and straight-up *nice* game at E3 2019. While based on the same technology, and sharing many systems, with 2016's *Planet Coaster*, this is a far more appealing proposition. Not only must you design and manage the perfect theme park, you must also care for a population of animals who are born, feed, breed and die, making way for the next generation who share their genes. A November release date feels optimistic at first: can a game like this survive the pre-Christmas crush? Then you see it, and the only thing that bothers you is the wait. A rare delight.



POKÉMON SWORD AND SHIELD

Developer Game Freak **Publisher** Nintendo, The Pokémon Company **Format** Switch **Release** November 15

Pokémon E3 appearances tend to come and go without too much fuss. The big reveal has usually happened a month or two beforehand, and so The Pokémon Company shows up to throw fans a small bone or two, maybe introducing a couple of new Pokémon and a bit of extra footage. But this year was different. Junichi Masuda confirmed during a Nintendo Treehouse interview that only Pokémon from *Sword* and *Shield*'s Galar region can be transferred from previous games via the Pokémon Home service. In other words, this is the first mainline entry since *Ruby* and *Sapphire* in which you won't be able to catch 'em all.

The fallout was as swift as it was predictable. First came the deluge of downvotes, then the hashtags, and then the ludicrous assertions: one Japanese fan insisted that new Pokémon models could be put together in five minutes, prompting a wave of 3D artists to tweet their own renders to prove otherwise. But with Galar's menagerie taking the total number of Pokémon past 1,000, it surely had to happen eventually. That's not just a lot of models to create and animate – not least since individual models have bespoke animations to give them more character – but a bewildering number of potential moves to balance. Evidently Game Freak has decided to take the hit this time for the sake of the

series' future; indeed, Masuda has said future Pokémon games will be similarly limited.

It's a pity, because otherwise *Sword* and *Shield* are shaping up to be the most dynamic, expansive pair of Pokémon games to date. Beyond the cities and towns is a large open space (known as the Wild Area) in which you can roam freely, while current weather conditions and time of day determine the wild Pokémon you'll encounter. Alas, the E3 build limits our hands-on time to a single gym, whose gimmick involves pressing switches to move obstructive water pillars. But there's a greater sense of ceremony here, giving the final encounter against gym leader Nessa a big-event feel, as you battle in front of a crowd.

You'll soon see why the extra arena space is required. The new Dynamax system turns one of your party into a kaiju-sized behemoth for three turns – potentially tilting a losing battle in your favour. You'll find permanently Dynamaxed enemies in the Wild Area – these powerful beasts are designed to be taken down by four players in *Pokémon Go*-style co-operative raids. And with Game Freak's resident Brit, James Turner, as art director, Galar doesn't just offer some of the best monster designs in quite a while, but an optimistic vision of Britain that makes a charming counterpoint to *Watch Dogs: Legion*'s post-Brexit dystopia.

The new Dynamax system turns one of your party into a kaiju-sized behemoth for three turns



MONSTER HUNTER: WORLD – ICEBORNE

Developer/publisher Capcom **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** September 6

We're out of practice. It takes a few seconds of our gunblade bonking off the flank of the Banbaro we're trying to fell before we remember we need to sharpen it. *Monster Hunter* is a game of delightful little rituals; our time away has cost us dearly.

This mammoth expansion offers an incentive to return to Capcom's beast-hunting RPG, with the snowy Hoarfrost Reach set to be the game's largest region yet. But new mechanical additions are a prod at longtime players, too – while not all are earth-shakingly significant, each is designed to disrupt routine. Hot drinks are one example: the climate takes a toll on your stamina, even reducing the size of the bar itself over time, and

sipping a hot drink is the only way to replenish and reset your state. It's not too intrusive, but does add another layer of micromanagement to *World's* jam-packed fights.

The theme continues with travel through the snow, which slows you down and depletes stamina – now you can ride smaller monsters to move faster and conserve energy. The new Clutch Claw, meanwhile, allows players to grapple onto a monster's various body parts for an easier mount, although attempting to use it on an enraged beast will end in disaster. We may end up getting tossed into several snowdrifts, but *Iceborne* looks set to keep us on our toes.



CODE VEIN

Developer/publisher Bandai Namco Entertainment
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** September 27

In Bandai Namco's presentation room, a squawk of laughter followed the opening line of *Code Vein's* trailer: "It seems everyone everywhere is thirsty." Well, yes: if you're going to go after the anime fans, Namco, that's a given.

Sure enough, while our protagonist character is clad in sensible armour, female AI companion Io has to swing an axe while wearing hotpants. The combat maintains the roll-hit-backstab structure of *Dark Souls*, but forgoing the heft in favour of JRPG-style speed and flourish. Minibosses are frequent and thrilling, each with their own striking visual designs and movements. The Blade Bearer boss, however, is like fighting a squiffy version of Sister Friede – she's disappointingly distracted by our AI chum, and starts dashing into a wall at one point. Still, at least she's wearing trousers.



SAMURAI GUNN 2

Developer Teknopants **Publisher** Double Fine Productions
Format PC, Switch **Release** 2019

First released in 2013, Beau Blyth's fourplayer bushido battle was an **Edge** lunchtime fixture for a good while. The sequel expands the roster, adds more detailed character art and throws in a new dash move. While it consumes one of your stock of three bullets, it's worth the trade-off, increasing mobility around the arena and helping you escape death, since incoming blows are parried automatically. With the development team increased to seven people, the game will include a full campaign adventure, playable in singleplayer or twoplayer co-op; there's even a graphic novel, available in-game and a physical edition. Details beyond that are scant, but it's already an irresistible proposition: the only thing wrong with the first game was the need to get four players together at once. The **Edge** headcount hasn't exactly grown since 2013.

2019@E3



BORDERLANDS 3

Developer Gearbox Software **Publisher** 2K Games **Format** PC, PS4, Stadia, Xbox One **Release** September 13

The billboard-sized slogan poster across the Los Angeles Convention Center might boast of mayhem, but the heart of *Borderlands 3* is a quiet precision. It might sound crazy – after all, a game with a billion guns in its holsters and the personality of a pre-teen who’s just discovered the outro to Killing In The Name Of is anything but low-volume – but Gearbox’s latest is a confidently stable and generous multiplayer shooter.

You may not have even realised it. While many top-tier developers chase battle royale for any potential bite of the cherry – no matter how small the chunk, no mind the damage to reputation – Gearbox has stuck to what it knows best and, on this evidence, has stuck the landing. In terms of design, anyway: the marketing has been a different matter. Studio president Randy Pitchford has, over the last few months, only opened his mouth in order to put his foot in it. He is, wisely, nowhere to be seen at E3.

More guns and new planets is essentially the heart of it, yet the devilishly fun playthings and beautifully crafted spaces play host to such a confident handling of the ‘looter shooter’ mechanisms that it’s hard not to appreciate the satisfying flow once it’s in the hands. Combat pings with such a punched-up gusto that, along with the generous amount of playable launch

content, it’s clear where the last five or so years of development went: into how any one of those guns feels to actually fire; into how you can combine various elemental effects and abilities to more expertly chain kills together; into the fact all of that inevitable loot is now more easily shareable.

Moze the Gunner makes her debut at E3, dual-wielding in much the same way as the previous game’s Gunzerker class. However, having three character-specific Action Skills instead of the previous maximum of one makes all the difference. Combining the boosted sensory response from a trigger squeeze with the wider array of specialisation options means *Borderlands 3* feels in line with something you’d expect from Id or Bungie, not the team that turned out the comparatively trigger-limp *Borderlands 2*.

We finish with a climactic dance of death with Mouthpiece, one of the bosses, who’s armed with a missile launcher and a room full of neon-rimmed high-wattage amps ready to sonically sever your head. It’s Gearbox at its most anarchically flashy and sums up exactly what *Borderlands* is: more. More generous, more obnoxious, and more keenly aware that it is perfectly primed to dodge the always-on hassle of every other blockbuster shooter out there. Kitchen-sink design is a risky business, but Gearbox looks to have pulled it off.

Perfectly primed
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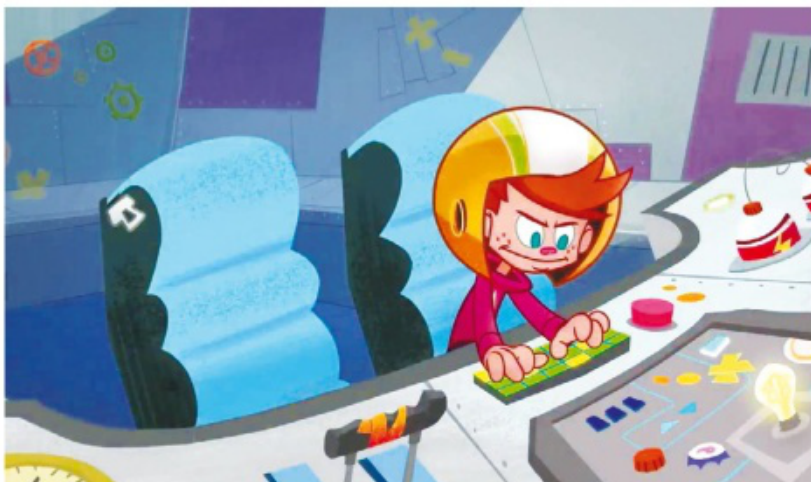
CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE

Developer Infinity Ward **Publisher** Activision **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** October 25

Yes, the name is a mess. The fourth *Modern Warfare* – a sub-series that began with the fourth *Call Of Duty* – arrives with no number in its title, and two years after the apparent release of its own remaster. But that is the only unnecessarily convoluted thing about a game that not only seeks to harken back to the days when *Call Of Duty* ruled the world, but to recapture them as well. This is a return to first principles.

Our demo centres on a new multiplayer mode, the rather more straightforwardly titled 2V2. There is no health regen or respawning, and the first team to win six rounds takes the match. Loadouts are fixed, rotating every two rounds: at first

everyone has only a pistol, but later on you'll head into battle with an LMG and RPG launcher. It's delightful, and removes a lot of long-standing *COD* frustrations by putting everyone on an even footing. When you rush with a shotgun, for instance, you know exactly what you're rushing into; pay attention and you can identify the moment the other team runs out of RPG rounds, and tweak your approach. Maps are tight, broadly symmetrical and offer only limited elevation. It's a battle of tactics, communication, skill and wits, highly enjoyable and eminently watchable. Two years on from the 'boots on the ground' meme, *Call Of Duty* may be finally finding its feet.



COMMANDER KEEN

Developer Zenimax Online Studios **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks
Format Android, iOS **Release** 2019

Bethesda's conference reached a new high – okay, a new low – for the volume levels of overexcited crowd members, with some greeting every gory kill, game logo or line from the teleprompter as if it was the winning goal in a cup final. And if you thought it was annoying on the livestream, you should have tried being in the room. Hats off, then, to the commenter on Eurogamer's liveblog who responded to the announcement of a free-to-play *Commander Keen* mobile game with the legend: "Cheer for *that*, you cunts."

While the series was created by Id, development duties are being handled by Zenimax Online Studios, and while the maker of *The Elder Scrolls Online* wouldn't be our first port of call if we wanted a side-scrolling platformer made, in fairness neither would Id. Soft launching imminently; don't all rush at once.



PHOENIX POINT

Developer/publisher Snapshot Games
Format PC, Xbox One **Release** 2019

We spot Julian Gollop hovering near *Phoenix Point's* demo station, looking relaxed. He has every reason to be confident – the *X-COM* creator's new turn-based tactics game is shaping up nicely. Positioning units around the map feels excellent as we jetpack soldiers onto rooftops: then, when actions play out, the visual clues are clearly presented, meaning we can make the most of our turns.

The limb-targeting system enhances this. Instead of having to find the right angle to open fire on a shield-carrying enemy, a VATS-esque thirdperson view lets us move our crosshairs over an exposed leg – or we can unload a clip into destructible cover to create new openings. It's remarkably flexible; we're even assured the dynamic narrative changes depending on the relationships you build with the game's three human factions. This could be a dramatic rebirth.



THE DARK PICTURES ANTHOLOGY: MAN OF MEDAN

Developer Supermassive Games **Publisher** Bandai Namco Entertainment
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2019

The first instalment in *The Dark Pictures Anthology* hews close to the schlocky horror of Supermassive's breakout hit, *Until Dawn*. A group of flirty co-eds' drunken boating holiday turns nasty when they're boarded by pirates – and harrassed by the damned. This time, the dialogue choices are presented via a compass, letting you select characters' responses, actions or reactions during a kidnapping scene. As the old saying goes, your choices have consequences, and on the off-chance you grow attached to any of the stars, you'll regret your button-mashing costing somebody a limb. Decent acting means this will doubtless be a useful addition to the clutch of party games for those players still interested in choice-and-consequence QTE marathons.



THE OUTER WORLDS

Developer Obsidian Entertainment **Publisher** Private Division
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** October 25

Sympathies to our friends at PC Gamer, who carved out a space in their busy E3 schedules for a behind-closed-doors look at *The Outer Worlds* – only for the whole demo to be shown at the E3 Coliseum and posted on YouTube days later. Despite the questionable media strategy, the interstellar RPG from the creator of *Fallout: New Vegas* is awfully charismatic. Obsidian's bizarre humour is on top form in this corporatist solar system. You can build up stats to intimidate, charm, or lie to NPCs, which sets up some great gags – as does the Flaw system, which allows you to accept a character weakness, such as a fear of robots, in exchange for an extra Perk point. It was a worryingly brief glimpse at a sprawling adventure, however: how much influence you'll have on its world, and whether it can emerge from *New Vegas*' shadow, remains to be seen.



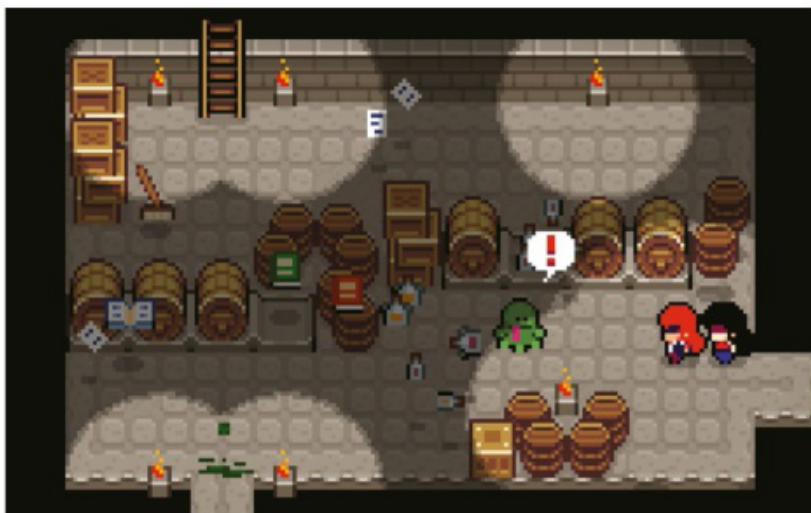
THE DARK CRYSTAL: AGE OF RESISTANCE TACTICS

Developer BonusXP **Publisher** En Masse Entertainment **Format** PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Release** 2019

It's perhaps surprising it's taken Netflix so long to move into videogames. One of the first fruits of its endeavour is this turn-based strategy game that, on first inspection, is the sort of licensed tie-in the industry left behind long ago. Working from the new Netflix show's script, referencing concept art and in liaison with The Jim Henson Company, *Tactics* mirrors the show's storyline, spicing things up with sidequests and an arena mode. Visuals are rudimentary, character types and movesets are predictable, and it all seems to lack a certain spark.

Yet there is more to this than meets the eye. The team at BonusXP contains former staff from strategy master Ensemble;

the chief designer is Bruce Shelley, the co-designer of *Railroad Tycoon* and *Civilization* and an Ensemble co-founder. There's little of his influence apparent in a game that's still early in development, and using a custom-made level for the E3 demo to avoid spoiling the show dilutes the allure. But there are the seeds of some fine ideas here. You can disrupt the turn order, for instance, by not using both your allotted actions – moving but not attacking, say – which preserves your speed meter and lets you jump the queue. If it feels old-fashioned then, well, that's appropriate for the tie-in to a TV show that, 37 years on from the film (good god), is still mostly made with puppets.



IKENFELL

Developer Happy Ray Games **Publisher** Humble Bundle
Format PC, Xbox One **Release** 2019

Chevy Ray Johnston's Kickstarted project follows a group of misbehaving magical students as they fight through the halls of their perilous school. Think the turn-based tactics of JRPGs of yore, plus an added layer of skill. Instead of an MP meter, executing unique timing challenges powers your spells, allowing you to blast enemies with fire or heal your ailing party members (of which you can choose three from a pool of six, each with their own abilities).

Creative enemy design puts the concept to work in charming ways. We spot a giant mushroom burping up a long-lost sword at your party: you must parry the flying weapon twice in a row. Elsewhere, there are puzzles to solve in alchemy labs and astronomy towers, and mysteries to unravel. To top it all, it's being scored by the musical talents behind Steven Universe's soundtrack.



UNDERMINE

Developer/publisher Thorium
Format PC, Switch, Xbox One **Release** Summer (PC), 2020 (Switch, Xbox One)

Sporting a tidy soup-catcher, *UnderMine*'s portly hero looks like Ron Swanson in miner garb – which is one unique selling point for an action-adventure Roguelike that wears its influences on its sleeve. Sent below ground by a stern archmage, our moustachioed protagonist is investigating a series of violent tremors; he uses his pickaxe to smash rocks and enemies alike, while rescuing NPCs (including a blacksmith and a priestess) who can supply permanent upgrades. When you perish, these will be passed onto the next volunteer, who will face a new procedurally generated labyrinth – though the facial fuzz remains. With elements of *Stardew Valley*, *Rogue Legacy*, *SteamWorld Dig* and *The Binding Of Isaac*, it's borrowed from all the right places. We'll see whether or not it can find an identity of its own when it hits Early Access.



GHOST RECON: BREAKPOINT

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Paris) **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** October 4

Ubisoft's decision to cast The Punisher star Jon Bernthal in *Breakpoint* comes as a surprise, since we'd always figured he'd been borrowed from videogames in the first place. Still, here he is, playing the leader of the Wolves, a band of Ghosts gone rogue, which means they're the *bad* kind of wanton neck-stabbers, rather than the good kind, which is you and your crew.

Plenty has been added to the open-world murder template of 2017's *Ghost Recon: Wildlands*. One of the sillier additions is Prone Camo, which sees your spec-ops beefcake roll around in mud, snow or flowerbeds to disguise themselves

from Predator drones. Should one of them spot you, it will drop flares on your position to alert enemies in the vicinity to your presence. In a much-needed step up from the previous game, being detected merely means that remaining foes will try to find you, rather than becoming instantly aware of your location to the very pixel. Elsewhere, expect new weapons, gadgets, enemy types and neck-stab animations – the latter just as well given how often blade meets jugular – and *Destiny*-style supers that afford class-specific buffs such as health regen and recoil reduction. Staggeringly unexciting, though we wouldn't actually say so to Bernthal's face.



MARIO & SONIC AT THE OLYMPIC GAMES – TOKYO 2020

Developer/publisher Sega **Format** Switch **Release** November

Filling the *Mario Party* slot this year, the sixth sporting crossover starring these former rivals doesn't appear to be a great advance on the previous five. Our expectations are met: the E3 demo offers some disposable fun with events ranging from surprisingly moreish to 'let's never do this again'.

The controls menu for each looks fearsomely complex, albeit only by dint of offering several alternatives: by and large, it's a choice between button options and motion controls, with most using a single Joy-Con. For skateboarding you hold it out as if it were a board, tilting left and right and flicking up to leap off ramps. We switch to button controls for surfboarding,

a sport that's crying out for a decent videogame adaptation – and, on this evidence, still will be come November.

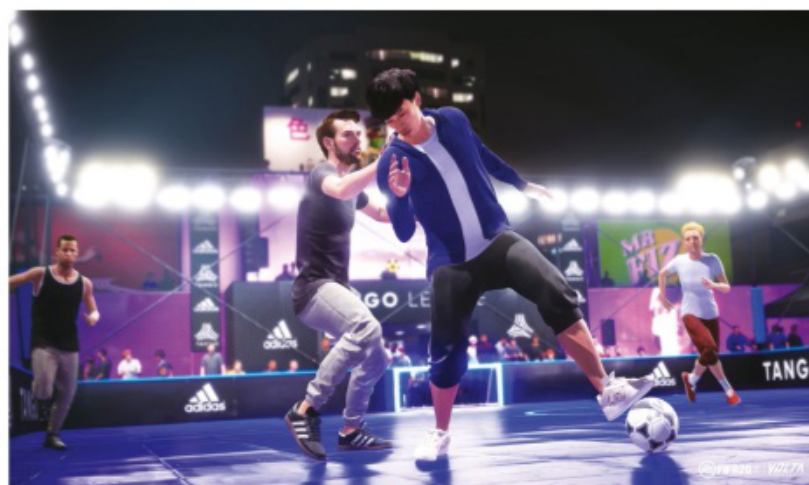
Archery is better, while making us realise how much we've missed *Wii Sports Resort*. Starting with two Joy-Cons held away from the body and facing each other, you draw back with the right, and tilt to aim with the left, factoring distance and wind strength into your shots. Karate, by contrast, offers slapstick hilarity that's over laughably quickly, the sport's elegance conspicuously absent. But then nuance is hardly the aim here; the game's accessibility is what will keep it in the charts in the run-up to the Olympics, before it's cast aside.



ANCESTORS: THE HUMANKIND ODYSSEY

Developer Panache Digital **Publisher** Private Division
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** August 27

Not every developer who claims they're happy to be at E3 is telling the truth, but Patrice Désilets' delight at being back on stage at the PC Gaming Show seemed wholly sincere. Charmingly describing himself as "the historical dude", Désilets has taken that moniker to extremes with *Ancestors*, whisking us back ten million years and putting us in charge of the survival of a clan of apes – all "badass characters", as he puts it. Cramping eight million years of evolution into a 60-hour adventure, it's a game that demands a lot from its players: with a minimal UI and precious little guidance, it asks you to tap into your primal instincts to slowly progress from prey to predator. It could be a tough sell for publisher Private Division, but it's clear Désilets is making the game he wants to make; after ten years away, surely no one can begrudge him that.



FIFA 20

Developer/publisher EA (Canada)
Format PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Release** September 27

With the Journey story mode no more, EA needs another way of luring in those who lack the time, patience or, yep, money for FIFA Ultimate Team. Enter Volta, a street-football mode that essentially bundles in the abandoned *FIFA Street* series. Teams of three to five players face off, with a variety of rulesets on offer. In a first for the series, men and women will be teammates.

As for the game at large, the theme this year is "football intelligence", which despite the appearance of Rio Ferdinand at EA Play is no contradiction in terms. Split into three sub-gimmicks ('authentic game flow', 'decisive moments' and 'ball physics') the aim is to deepen FIFA's authenticity by, as per, cramming it full of buzzwords. It'll count for nought the first time you head online and get stomped by a 14-year-old who's maxed out his parents' credit cards on FUT packs.



MOSAIC

Developer Krillbite **Publisher** Raw Fury
Format PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Release** 2019

It was cheering to see *Mosaic* get some airtime at the PC Gaming Show this year: the Playdead-esque narrative game – in which you play as an office worker on a monotonous or surreal daily commute, depending on whether you follow the crowd – has been on our radar for a while. In the new trailer, we find ourselves mesmerised by *BlipBlip*, Mosaic's in-game mobile clicker: we suspect that's the point.



BATTLETOADS

Developer Dlala Studios **Publisher** Xbox Game Studios
Format PC, Xbox One **Release** 2019

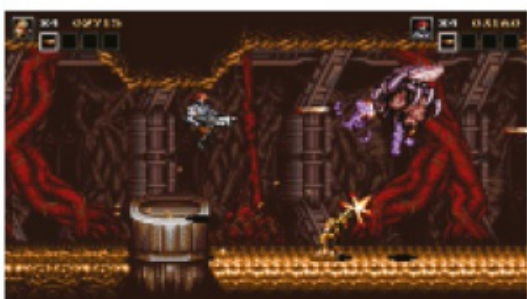
Dlala's roots in mobile show through in our first proper look at the reboot that, for some reason, lots of people asked for: the NES game's vehicle sections are now into-the-screen and contain more than a hint of *Temple Run*. Elsewhere, it's a rudimentary threeplayer brawler with the look of a particularly annoying Saturday-morning cartoon, aiming for *Cuphead* but evoking *Alien Hominid*.



GEARS POP!

Developer The Coalition, Mediatonic **Publisher** Xbox Game Studios
Format Android, iOS **Release** September 2

Ah, so it wasn't all a strange dream. Bravely taking up a whole 60 seconds of Microsoft's conference for the second year running, this unlikeliest of mobile spin-offs was teased with a bit of silent comedy, as the series' original antagonist Raam falls for the classic bolo-grenade-in-a-stuffed-kitten trick. Even the serial whoopers remained unmoved. And the game itself? *Clash Royale* with cover.



BLAZING CHROME

Developer JoyMasher **Publisher** The Arcade Crew
Format PC, PS4, Switch **Release** 2019

It's a weird old world where the unofficial *Contra* successor looks better than the real one. But this is what the indie scene is so good at. 16bit run-and-gun *Blazing Chrome* won't rock any worlds – it's an unapologetic homage to Konami's series with its 2D sprites, synthy beats and swarms of deliciously explosive enemies – but for those looking to scratch a particular retro itch, it'll get the job done.



PANZER DRAGOON: REMAKE

Developer Megapixel Studio **Publisher** Forever Entertainment
Format Switch **Release** Winter

The word 'remake' has many different meanings, but this rejig of Team Andromeda's classic Saturn rail shooter looks to be one of the good ones. A lavish graphical overhaul is evident in our first look at the reborn game, which is being made by new Polish developer Megapixel Studio. Improved controls are promised too, though without a Saturn pad involved that was always a given.



MARE

Developer/Publisher Rui Guerreiro, Visiontrick Media
Format Oculus platforms **Release** 2019

Somewhere in an alternate dimension, Friend & Foe's bird-girl adventure puzzler *Vane* wasn't a disappointment. Perhaps *Mare* is that game: started in 2016 after former *The Last Guardian* artist Rui Guerreiro left Friend & Foe to strike out on his own, it has the same *Ico*-esque premise, but sets it in VR. We're cautious but hopeful that this fork in the development path has a happy ending.



REMNANT: FROM THE ASHES

Developer Gunfire Games **Publisher** Perfect World Entertainment
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2019

Near the end of our Xbox Showcase session, we take pity on the curiously unpopular *Remnant: From The Ashes* stand. We're glad we do: slightly shonky and terribly lit, this thirdperson survival shooter is nonetheless intriguing as a kind of *Dark Souls* with guns. With dynamically generated maps, over 100 enemy types, 20 fiendish-looking bosses and optional co-op, this could be a dark horse.



LAST OASIS

Developer/publisher Donkey Crew
Format PC **Release** September 3

For a moment, this survival MMO looks like a *Rust* clone. And then come the wooden mechs. Skittering over the hillside, built and piloted by players in search of new territory, they put us in mind of Theo Jansen's unsettling Strandbeest structures. These mobile bases form the basis of a PvP battle for dominance across a planet torn into two environmentally hazardous halves. Count us in.



AUTO CHESS

Developer/publisher Drod Studios
Format Android, iOS, PC **Release** 2019

What began as a deck-builder mod for *Dota 2* called *Dota Auto Chess* is being spun out into a standalone game, *Auto Chess*, made by the original mod team but exclusive to the Epic Games Store. Valve is making a version of its own. And while we were getting our heads around all that, a *League Of Legends*-based take on the formula unseated *Fortnite* at the top of the Twitch charts.

2020@E3



FINAL FANTASY VII REMAKE

Developer/publisher Square Enix Format PS4 Release March 3

When you rework one of the most influential games of all time, there's a range of expectations, all of which are so far through the roof they're practically in orbit. To hold the attention of a contemporary audience, *Final Fantasy VII* needs more than a facelift. Equally, when you're revisiting the source of a generation's love of videogames, you have to tread carefully. And yet, here we are: breathless, mid-clash, suspended between the past and the present.

Indeed, it's a particular kind of suspension – Cloud's Buster sword slicing through the air in super-slow-motion as sparks graze his perfectly rendered cheek – that is key. *Final Fantasy VII Remake's* combat system comprises two separate modes. The first is action mode: we hammer buttons to hack at a Scorpion Sentinel and fill our ATB gauge, dodge blows, or switch between and reposition characters. Then there's tactical mode: when our ATB gauge is ready, we can slow down time.



In this state, we scroll through a menu that recalls the original game's turn-based interface – and have time to think. It frees up some mental space to assess a fight, and decide which limit break attacks or spells to spend meter on. It's a wonderful callback with a modern twist. Despite the change in pace, the pulse of the action doesn't slow, Nobuo Uematsu's orchestral theme thundering in our ears. We unleash a barrage of slashes on one leg until we can enter tactical mode, then switch to gunslinging heavy Barret – positioned at the Scorpion Sentinel's rear – and cast a Thunder spell. It hits the enemy's elemental weakness, and staggers it.

This is what we're after, although we weren't expecting it: once staggered, an enemy takes far more damage than normal. And so we

quickly change our plans, switching back to Cloud and activating his slow but hard-hitting Punisher mode before laying into the Sentinel. Later, tactical mode helps us see we need to destroy a certain part of the machine before whittling down the main health bar. Indeed, we push our efficiency to such thrilling extremes that the boss falls in record time. It's been a while since we felt this slick playing a show demo.

And, honestly, it's been a while since *Final Fantasy* felt this assured – this cool. To achieve such a confident result with this, a feverishly anticipated project years in the making, is a feat worth celebrating – and getting excited about. It's just as well: seeing as though this first release will only span the Midgar section, we might be playing *Remake* for the foreseeable future.



ANIMAL CROSSING: NEW HORIZONS

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD) Format Switch Release March 20

Oh Nintendo, you tease. Having given us what we came for, it hit us with the sucker punch: yes, here's your first look at *Animal Crossing* on Switch, but it's not coming this year. The old "please understand" talk was delivered as politely and apologetically as has become tradition, with the publisher insisting it's all about ensuring development staff have a good work-life balance. Which is, come to think of it, fitting for a game that's always managed to find a sweet spot between effort and reward.

There's more work for the development team, then, and more for the player this time around. The philanthropic Tom Nook has branched out his property development empire to include a getaway package to a deserted island. Though when you arrive there, all you have to show for it is a cramped tent, a fold-out camping cot, a lamp and a cheap radio. Presumably we'll meet his business partner Ja Rule later on.

You're really starting from scratch, in other words, and *New Horizons* leans into its DIY elements, inviting you to craft your own tools and furniture at Nook's workbench. You'll need five tree branches and a stone to make a flimsy axe; with it, you'll hack wood from trees that can be used to make a campfire, or a clothesline, or a bench to

rest upon. With a spade you can dig up clams from the beach to use as fishing bait. Alternatively, you can spend your time harvesting weeds and picking up branches, selling those raw materials so you can buy tools direct from Nook. All of these activities will contribute towards a reward system called Nook Miles, which can be exchanged for other items.

This may all seem like small beer, but in a series that makes the mundane feel important, even minor changes to the daily routine have a significant effect. The ability to move furniture in half-units, not to mention the opportunity to place it outside, represents a major selling point for *Animal Crossing*. Likewise, the ability to pole-vault over rivers (which looks delightful) and the way the strength of the wind is now reflected by the rustle of leaves in the trees.

There's room for eight players on your island, of whom four can play together at once – the camera will follow the selected host, with the rest whisked back to them should they stray too far – with the ability to share inventories and DIY recipes. You can finally change your skin tone, too, while features and hairstyles are now gender-neutral. It's a progression in every sense, then, though a new autosave function has put poor Resetti out of a job. And where, for that matter, is Isabelle?

**New Horizons
leans into its DIY
elements, inviting
you to craft
your own tools
and furniture**



GODS & MONSTERS

Developer/Publisher Ubisoft (Quebec)

Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** February 25

Ubisoft's press-conference closer sees its Quebec studio turn away from *Assassin's Creed's* historical tourism towards Greek mythology, and from an established Ubisoft template to, well, a bunch of other studios' ideas, and Nintendo EPD's in particular. The world, and the aesthetic, are pure *Breath Of The Wild*, and the game pilfers Link's stamina system to limit your movement. There is, however, a greater emphasis on traversal, with a triple jump and a *Guacamelee*-style airborne uppercut helping you reach far-off platforms.

The story is relayed in the flashback style, told by the poet Homer to a group of children around a campfire. Is that a framing device, or is Quebec also nicking *Bastion's* storytelling technique? It's a lovely looking game either way; if you're going to play the magpie, you might as well steal from the best.



PHANTASY STAR ONLINE 2

Developer/publisher Sega

Format PC, Xbox One **Release** 2020

The most exciting announcement of E3 2019 for a certain stripe of player (hello, *Destiny* pals!) is the long-overdue western arrival of a game first released in 2012. Sega's online action-RPG launched on PC and has been ported to Vita and Switch in Japan over the years. It was originally announced for the west, too, and was even playable at PAX West in 2012. It was delayed indefinitely the following year, and that was that – until now.

The western release will include all existing content, and will support cross-play between Xbox and PC. Joy was, briefly, unconfined, until Sega Europe turned up. It was a little too quick out of the blocks with a downer of a tweet revealing that *PSO2* is yet to be confirmed for release outside North America. Optimism endures, however, and if all else fails there's always the **Edge** VPN.



MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR

Developer/publisher Xbox Game Studios **Format** PC, Xbox One **Release** 2020

It's been a tumultuous ten years for *Flight Simulator*, at 35 years the longest-running piece of software Microsoft has ever made. In 2009 the series appeared dead, with Microsoft reportedly laying off the entire development team. The 2010s have been no kinder: first Microsoft turned out *Microsoft Flight*, its plans for post-release support cut short when the project was cancelled four months after launch. Then *Train Sim* maker Dovetail took on the licence and made the miserable *Flight Sim World*, cancelling it during early access last year.

That bad run looks to be over thanks to one of the most eye-catching announcements of E3. Powered by over two

petabytes of real-world satellite data and Microsoft's Azure AI, this is as sumptuous a simulation game as we've ever seen, its environments rendered in lavish detail and a realistic weather system complicating the business of keeping several hundred tonnes of metal in the air. Despite all the satellites, Microsoft insists the game will support community-created content – and that, while it's also coming to Xbox, it's still a full-fat simulator (the developer stressing this in caps lock in a blog post). That said, accessibility is a core focus, ensuring the game can be played on anything from an absurd home cockpit set-up to a knackered old mouse and keyboard. Tantalising stuff.



EVIL GENIUS 2: WORLD DOMINATION

Developer/publisher Rebellion Developments Format PC Release 2020

Tucked away in a first-floor meeting room is one of our favourite demo areas. The room in which Rebellion is offering a look at *Evil Genius 2* is accessible only by a keypad sunk into the doorknob; inside, two staffers sit behind a large desk, their office decked out in chunky white plastic that looks like it was lifted from the set of a superspy flick. Happily, the game they're showing off exhibits a similar level of craftsmanship.

The goal in this sequel to Elixir's 2004 simulation – itself a sort of spiritual successor to *Dungeon Keeper* – is to take over the world. You play as one of the four titular supervillains, each of whom has their own campaign, and must build,

expand and maintain your lair – the one in our demo is on a remote island and has a casino for a front – and ensure it's surrounded with a maze of traps to thwart invading superheroes. You also hire and train minions, and manage a network of henchmen while working your way towards building the doomsday device that will bring the planet to heel. While Rebellion had no involvement in the original – it bought the IP after Elixir closed down – it clearly understands what made it tick; this is charmingly presented stuff that, given the management sim's ongoing renaissance through the likes of *Two Point Hospital*, should go down a treat.



NO MORE HEROES III

Developer Grasshopper Manufacture Publisher Marvelous
Format Switch Release 2020

Despite Suda's long-standing association with Nintendo, seeing a game like *No More Heroes III* debuting during a Direct still prompts a double-take, even if the family-friendly edit trimmed the blood and Travis Touchdown's trademark cry of "fuckhead!" from the trailer. By next year's launch, it will have been a decade since the second game, yet Travis is showing no signs of having grown up. Marriage to former handler Sylvia Christel, seen here suggestively playing with a pair of cocktail cherries, has clearly not softened him: in a scene reminiscent of Suda's *Liberation Maiden*, he dons power armour and flies up to take down a group of extraterrestrial invaders. What follows is familiar stuff as he attacks them with his beam katana, slamming one to the floor with a motion-controlled suplex. After last year's misguided spin-off, it's good to have the old Travis back.



ORI AND THE WILL OF THE WISPS

Developer Moon Studios Publisher Xbox Game Studios
Format PC, Xbox One Release February 11

Microsoft's troubles this generation can be summed up by the fact this is the third year running Moon Studios' eagerly anticipated sequel has been trailed – and it's still more than six months away. It's also the third year running it looks even more visually staggering than the last: in a year of CG trailers, here was gameplay footage that could easily be mistaken for CG. The first game's escape sequences have apparently been replaced by boss fights. In one, Ori faces a huge spider spitting out stringy webbing; in another, it must dodge the claws of a vicious wolf, fending it off with flaming sticks. With a terrifying lava worm, and some squid-like underwater menace besides, Ori will need all of its revamped moveset (including a grapple we hope is less fussy than the previous game's Bash ability) to survive. Our swear box, we suspect, will fill up quickly.



12 MINUTES

Developer Luis Antonio **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive **Format** PC, Xbox One **Release** 2020

This is the year of the videogame time-loop, perhaps reflective of a society pining for a do-over to escape our current dumbest timeline. Following on from *Outer Wilds* and *Deathloop* comes *12 Minutes*, a game that shows the dramatic effect that borrowing your game's central hook from *Groundhog Day* can have on the asset-creation process. Luis Antonio, previously an artist on Jonathan Blow's *The Witness*, is making this, one of the most eye-catching announcements of the biggest videogame show on the planet, all on his lonesome.

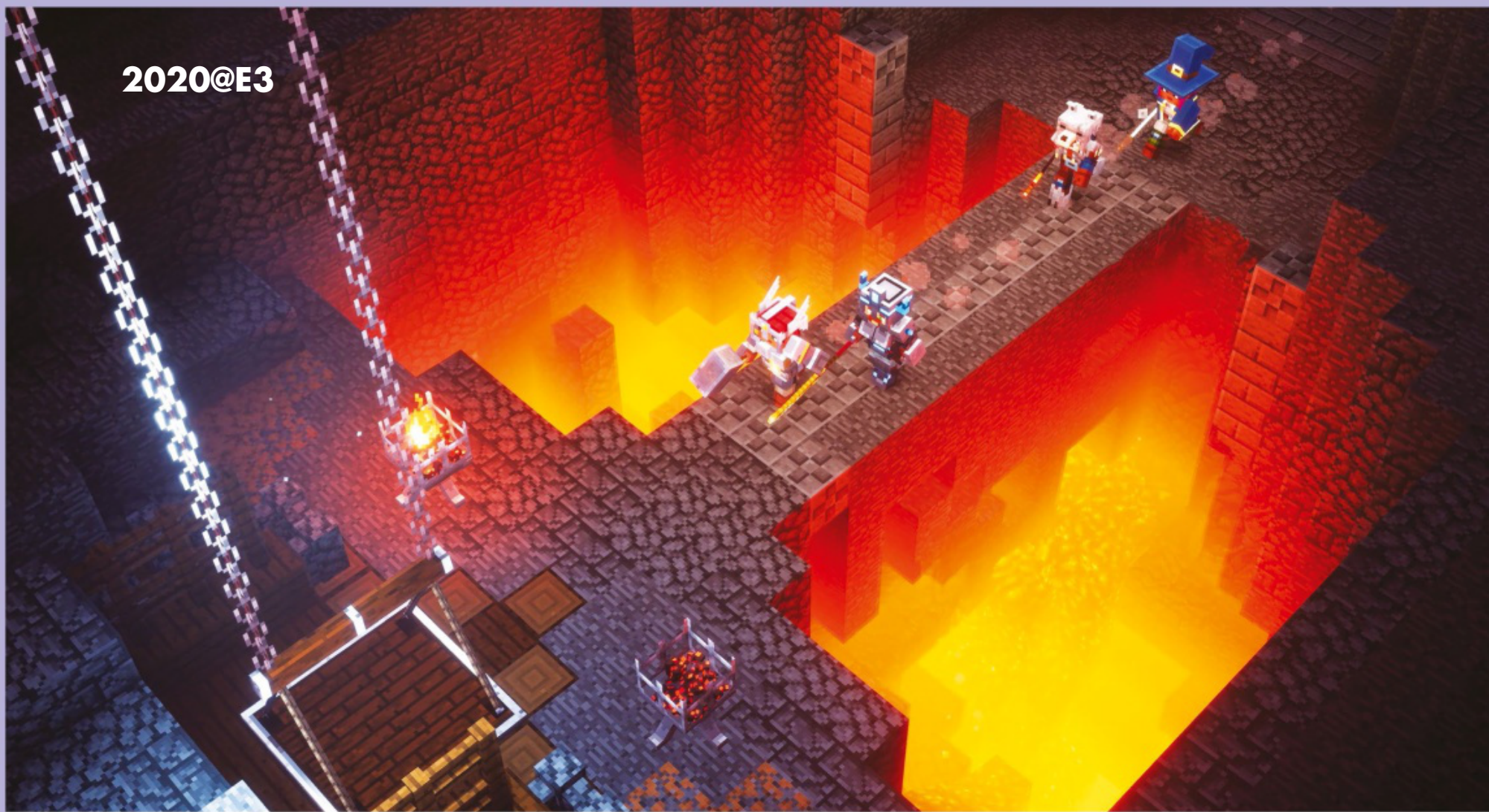
That's evident in the often comical placeholder animations in the demo build we're shown behind closed doors in the Microsoft Theater, as some supposedly serious moments prompt giggles from other, less polite hacks in the room. Temporary SFX are also in place, and while the final game will be fully voiced, for now there are only subtitles. But there's nothing that's work-in-progress about the enormous potential of the concept. You play a man coming home from work to his wife at dinnertime. After a maximum of 12 minutes there's a bang at the door, seemingly from the police. A bald, black-suited man enters, tells your wife she's been found guilty of the murder of her father, then kills her on the spot. He does the same to you; the screen fades to black; and you

come to, vomiting on the kitchen floor, the clock wound back to the start.

The idea, then, is to use what you learned on previous runs to inform your decision-making in the next one, though every loop is slightly different. The first loop is a normal evening, your wife announcing her pregnancy over dessert, sending you on a scavenger hunt for a gift box with some baby clothes inside. On the second run, you'll try to convince her that you're both about to be killed, telling her you've seen this night before – and by way of proof you'll head off to the bedroom unprompted to retrieve the gift box. It's still not enough to convince her, naturally. We try and fight the intruder; we get killed. We try not answering the door; the bald man kicks it in, and we get killed. We try hiding in a cupboard; we get killed again, and if we're honest this time we probably deserve it.

It quickly becomes apparent that, in order to solve your own murder, you must first solve another. Your dialogue options shift slightly between runs as you seek not only to get your wife to come clean about the cause of her father's death, but to do so as quickly as possible, mindful of the ever-ticking clock. Intriguing stuff, and further proof that no publisher in the industry currently has so keen an eye as Annapurna.

There's nothing that's work-in-progress about the enormous potential of the concept



MINECRAFT DUNGEONS

Developer Mojang **Publisher** Mojang, Xbox Game Studios **Format** PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Release** 2020

We never thought we'd say this about a dungeon-crawler, but we honestly find *Minecraft Dungeons* very soothing. Mojang's spin-off is a kid-friendly take on *Diablo*, combining the timeless charm of *Minecraft* with the compulsive loop of a finely tuned action-RPG. *Dungeons* is designed to go down easy. The visuals, in particular, have been softened: the harsh edges of *Minecraft*'s art style are smoothed somewhat by Unreal's lighting and physics, torches throwing flickering golden haloes across the walls.

The dungeons are randomly generated, *Dungeons* assembling a new layout made up of 'rooms' upon each playthrough. Each of these is a hand-designed chunk, so when it's all slotted together, every dungeon has something of its own identity – much like a *Minecraft* world seed.

The essential spirit of the original remains, then. Characters still swing swords stiffly, like action figures; creepers skitter and bow-wielding skeletons swarm; a key needed to solve a basic early-game puzzle is an anthropomorphic delight, dashing off on its little legs if you're hit by an enemy while carrying it to the locked door. The switch to a top-down view, however, means that certain familiar elements have had to be adapted. Spiders return, but instead of charging you down, they'll now also hock great wads of webbing at you from afar.

This is because you're better equipped for a fight. For many players, *Minecraft*'s combat was supplementary to its crafting and building loop; in *Dungeons*, crafting is done away with in favour of focusing on a faster, more complex battle system. Expect all manner of weaponry: staves, dual blades, gigantic zombie-crushing hammers. Unlike the *Diablo* series, you won't choose a class at the beginning of a run: *Minecraft Dungeons*' approach

to building a warrior is flexible, encouraging players to constantly switch up builds. It's kept simple: there are three slots for a melee weapon, a ranged weapon and a piece of armour, and three more for various abilities such as area-of-effect spells and piercing laser attacks.

A reworked enchantment system has you using points earned from levelling up to modify gear, each piece rolling with different options: you can electrify a staff for extra damage, or poison it for a damage-over-time effect. Meanwhile, in up to fourplayer local or online co-op, it's sensible to have one party member equip an item that provides extra defence for party members within a certain range. *Minecraft Dungeons* is as by-the-numbers as it comes, and so there's little to really criticise. There's a strange comfort in the certainty that this will sell like hot cakes, and doubtless delight a new generation of dungeon crawlers.

Combines the timeless charm of *Minecraft* with the compulsive loop of a finely tuned action-RPG



WATCH DOGS LEGION

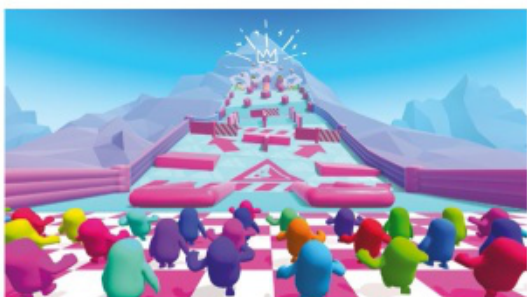
Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Toronto) **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** March 6

Espousing the need for collective action, talking about “the heroes that live in each of us” – it was easy to forget Clint Hocking was on stage to talk about a videogame and not begin a revolution. Then again, his line about “deportation squads ripping people from their homes” was an uncomfortable reminder that *Legion*’s dystopian future is happening right now.

Legion’s play-as-anyone hook is incredibly exciting, even if Ubi’s demo footage made it look a bit too Guy Ritchie at times. Sure, combat is always an easier sell than stealth, but even the alternative options were surprisingly violent: Hacker-class spider-bots are essentially electrical facehuggers. Still, given the

threat of permadeath, sometimes desperate measures are required – and there’s a John-Wick-like efficiency to the close-quarters takedowns. There’s still room for quiet ingenuity, too: you can send a meme to a guard’s phone as a distraction.

Yet there’s collateral damage in every uprising. When a character is critically injured, you can choose whether to surrender or resist arrest. The latter is naturally more risky, though if you end up dying (holding B to ‘lay to rest’ may be the new ‘press F to pay respects’) the story will adapt, with your other recruits referencing the fallen in their dialogue. Assuming it all works as advertised, we can’t wait to see more.

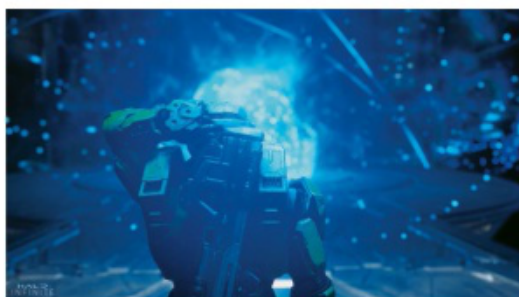


FALL GUYS

Developer Mediatonic **Publisher** Devolver Digital
Format PC, PS4 **Release** 2020

Now here’s an idea: a battle royale game that swaps the molar-grinding tension for good, clean, bite-sized fun. Well, sort of. *Fall Guys* casts you as one of 100 contenders in a softplay game show – it’s like Takeshi’s Castle, if every contestant ran the gauntlet simultaneously. The result is a series of ham-fisted winner-stays-on brawls in which we gleefully trample our friends under our pudgy feet.

In one round, we race towards ever-decreasing numbers of walls, only one of which is ever breakable. *Mario Kart* tactics reign: we hang back to see who bounces off a solid one before heading, cackling, for another option. Another game has us snatch tails from other players – those without are eliminated when time’s up. Bots present little challenge in our demo, but if Mediatonic can pull off multiplayer on this scale, we’re looking forward to reentering this squishy, low-stakes arena.



HALO INFINITE

Developer 343 Industries **Publisher** Xbox Game Studios
Format PC, Xbox One **Release** 2020

Designed to power the next decade of *Halo* games, 343’s Slipspace engine didn’t get much of a workout in the opening cinematic from *Infinite*’s campaign. What stands out are the aesthetic choices. Master Chief’s suit draws on the designs used in *Halo 3*, *4* and *5*; the shield-recharge sound effect, meanwhile, is a reprise of that found in *Combat Evolved*.

The latter is instructive, a conscious reminder of how Chief’s debut carried the weight of Microsoft’s foray into videogames on its shoulders. Eighteen years later, *Infinite* is being positioned as the flagbearer for Scarlett – well, sort of. As exciting as it is for *Halo* to launch alongside a new Xbox, can this really be called a system-seller? Yes, it will launch with Scarlett. It will also run on PC, and Xbox One; it will be on Game Pass, and presumably xCloud. Will the masses upgrade their hardware for a new *Halo*, or play it for free on their phones?



SUPER CRUSH KO

Developer/publisher Vertex Pop
Format PC, Switch **Release** 2020

Edge doesn’t do E3 awards, but if we did, *Super Crush KO* – a side-scrolling brawler made by the team behind *Graceful Explosion Machine* – would win ‘Juiciest Game Of The Show’. Think *Devil May Cry* via *Super Smash Bros* inputs, plus Vertex Pop’s signature pastels and meticulous attention to animation detail. On a mission to rescue your cat, you bounce, shoot and dive-kick your way through a city overrun by robots. Power-ups grant new abilities: pizza gives us Uppercut Slice, allowing us to strike upwards through platforms, and a pretzel unlocks a horizontal Twister Drill charge. With Air Pop, we can change direction mid-air with a punch, chaining together combos that zig-zag around the screen. Vertex Pop has nailed a *Street Fighter*-esque feel, with clean visual feedback and perfectly judged hit-stun: this is a team that knows how to squeeze the most out of a simple concept.

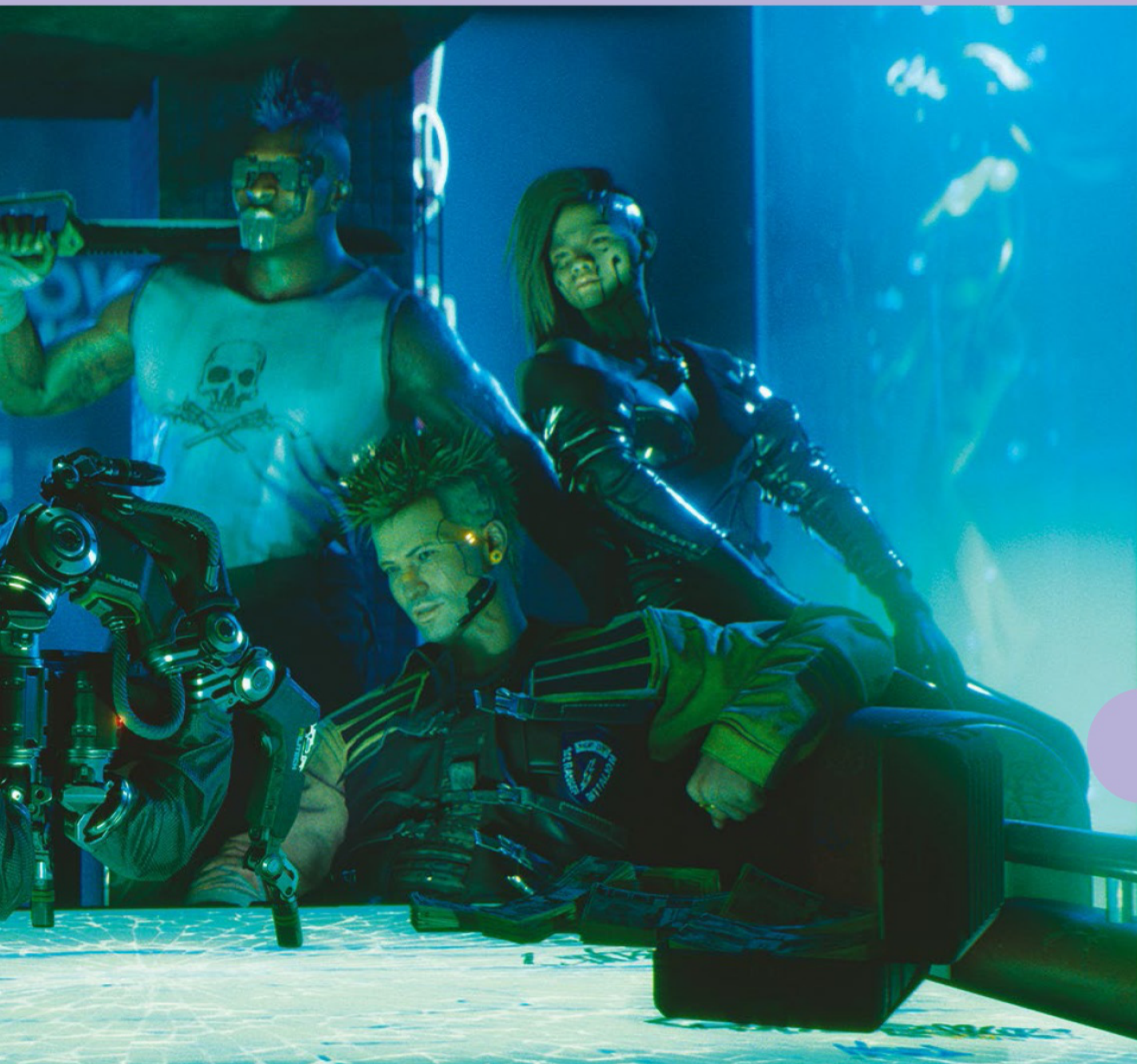


CYBERPUNK 2077

Developer/publisher CD Projekt Red **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** April 16

For better and worse, *Cyberpunk 2077* looks more believable this year. It's partially the setting. This time, our demo takes place in the dingy district of Pacifica: this was to be Night City's next big playground for the rich, before investors pulled funding. Now it's a lawless waste, with gigantic lawn flamingos and the iron skeletons of half-finished rollercoasters against its skyline. We're a long way from the glitter of the city centre's billboards and holographic cherry trees.

But things have become less sparkly on the mission side of things, too (Keanu Reeves' turn as Johnny Silverhand, the digital conscience living inside your biochip, aside). Mercenary V is contracted by the Voodoo Boys to hunt down their rival gang, the Animals, and put a stop to their competing operations. What follows, at its core, is familiar. You can choose to go loud or be stealthy – our demo handler uses some developer magic to switch between two different character builds made



with *Cyberpunk 2077*'s fluid class system, one a remote hacking-focused Netrunner and the other a brutally physical Strong Solo. But it's the details that help elevate a tried-and-tested structure.

The Grand Imperial Mall is where the Animals are holed up. Once intended as a gleaming shrine to capitalism, it's become host to a thriving electronics black market. We watch as the Netrunner build despatches a room of thugs swiftly and near-silently, first by hacking a nearby vending machine with nanowire via a minigame, then using the same body mod to jack into an enemy brain and override their arm, forcing them to pull a grenade pin on themselves. Then it's the turn of the Strong Solo, our demo handler punching through foes like paper walls. Instead of unlocking a door, they rip it off its hinges; rather than

turn a turret via its software, they simply tear it off its stand and use it as a makeshift machine gun.

There's something hugely satisfying about the Strong Solo's ridiculous brawn, although the Netrunner is undoubtedly where the tactical side of *Cyberpunk 2077*'s combat lives. We have a hard time believing players will choose muscles over mischief – especially when we see the Netrunner command an internet-connected gym, compelling a robotic practice dummy to punch the head clean off its assailant. Still, much of what we see this year is a *Watch Dogs* or a *Deus Ex* with a wicked streak; last year's next-gen, more open-world-focused demo was always going to be a tough act to follow. The upside is that, alongside a confirmed release date, the future now seems well within our grasp.



DRAGON BALL Z: KAKAROT

Developer CyberConnect2 **Publisher** Bandai Namco Entertainment
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2020

Dragon Ball Z has long been the preserve of fighting games, but the RPG genre suits it well. Sure, it's a show about hurling fireballs at other 'roided-out aliens – but it's also about the smaller character moments. *Dragon Ball Z: Kakarot* is an attempt to represent the true breadth of the series' universe. This, apparently, involves being able to fish by wiggling Goku's backside at bodies of water.

This goofy tail-fishing mechanic sets the tone for a different kind of *Dragon Ball* game. You'll spend more time riding around on a Nimbus cloud exploring its huge, open areas and running errands for townsfolk than you will battering bosses. A singleplayer game means CyberConnect2 can lean into the theatrical, often one-sided nature of Dragon Ball's super-powered clashes – this could be the most faithful videogame representation of the anime series so far.



LEGO STAR WARS: THE SKYWALKER SAGA

Developer Travellers' Tales **Publisher** Warner Bros Interactive Entertainment
Format PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Release** 2020

Yes, you can skip *Attack Of The Clones*. All nine episodes of Lucasfilm's space opera will be unlocked from the start, meaning you can play them in chronological, release or even Machete order. Though even the episodes featured in earlier *Lego* games have been reworked, so perhaps it's time to give the prequels another chance. Besides, for a mostly risk-averse series, this represents a giant stride forward. The planets act as sandbox hubs, letting you wander around key locations between story missions. These will feature more involving combat, with thirdperson aiming (including limb-targeting) for shootouts and a combo system for lightsaber battles. *The Rise Of Skywalker* is the main draw, but this will also be the first time we've seen *The Last Jedi* in a *Lego Star Wars* game. We'll expect the petitions any day now, shall we?



SPIRITFARER

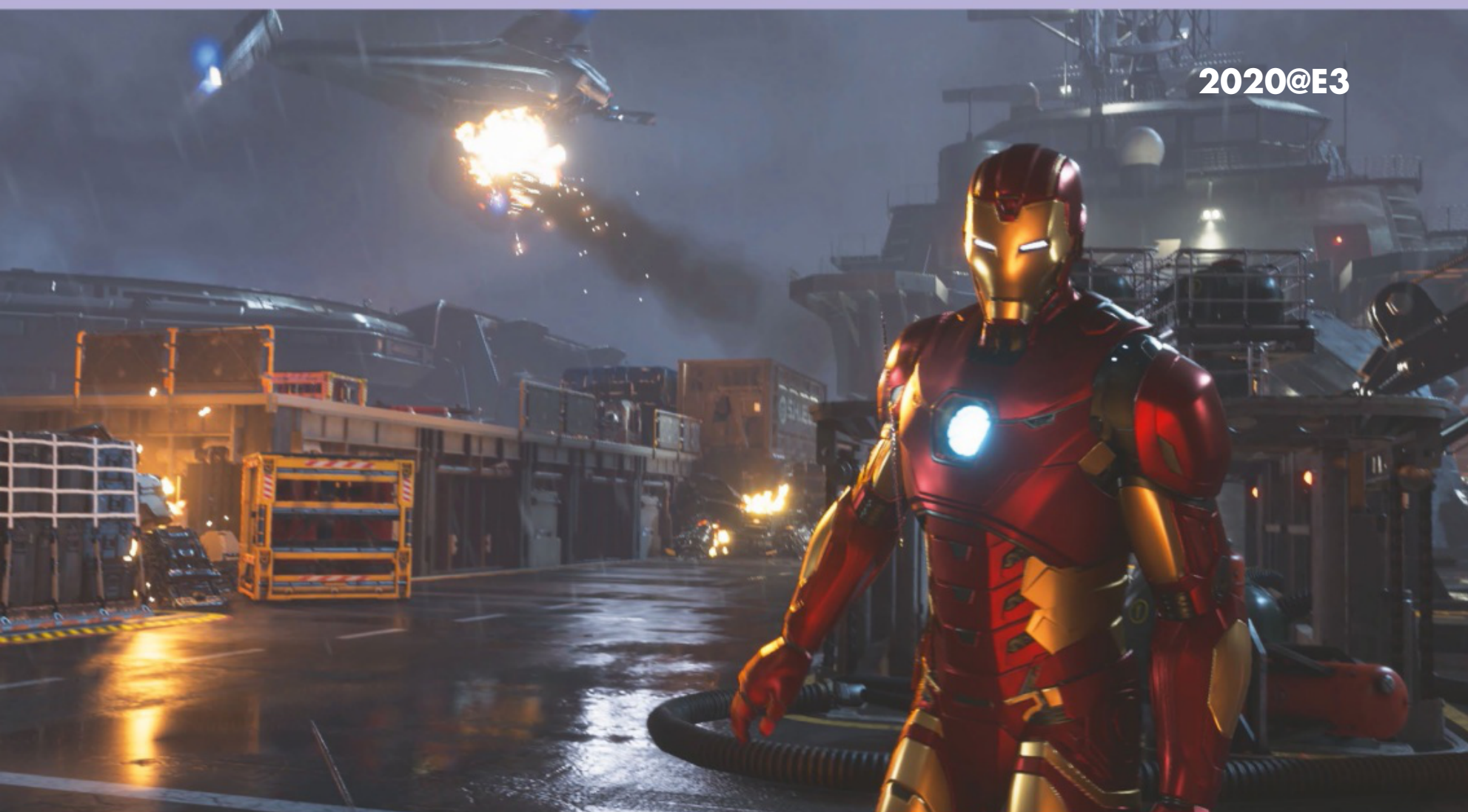
Developer/Publisher Thunder Lotus Games **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2020

There is peace to be found in little rituals. *Spiritfarer* knows this: it's a management sim in which you build a village on a boat. You mine, gather, craft, fish, cook, garden and decorate to your heart's content, and chat with residents. In much the same way as in *Animal Crossing* and *Stardew Valley*, Thunder Lotus' latest is about the joy of nurturing the soul.

Or, rather, souls. *Spiritfarer* reimagines Hades' ferryman Charon with a friendlier face: you play Stella, a charming, witchy sort of girl who helps the departed cross from the land of the living to the world of the dead. Each spirit – a beautiful, standoffish deer, a jovial frog, a snake swaying gently in a

much-too-large robe – has their own story to tell. You must guide them through coming to terms with their death.

But, as anyone with any experience in these matters will tell you, it's not all deep, meaningful conversations. Actions can speak louder than words: we find ourselves knocking up a new house for our serpentine friend, before setting a course for Hummingberg. Travelling to various landmasses lets you gather resources, spend currency (earned by catching a storm's lightning strikes before they hit your boat) and pick up new passengers. Eventually, you'll send them off to their final rest with a hug – and, presumably, find a peace of your own.



MARVEL'S AVENGERS

Developer Crystal Dynamics, Eidos Montreal **Publisher** Square Enix **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One, Stadia **Release** May 15

Marvel's *Spider-Man* didn't make a great first impression, either. We're all for emphasising the cinematic aspects of these superhero games, but surely there's a better way to introduce them than stringing a bunch of cutscenes and QTE segments together and calling it a day. *Marvel's Avengers* is guilty of the same tired approach to videogame marketing – and at least Peter Parker certainly didn't look anywhere near as ropy as these assembled Avengers.

Just like *Spider-Man*'s first E3 showing before it, our behind-closed-doors demo is a bombastic on-rails romp through a story mission. Bizarrely voiced and scripted scenes and bouts of mindless button-bashing push the action forward as the team clear out baddies from a bridge in San Francisco. This is an original Avengers story, we're told, which begs the question: why have Crystal Dynamics and Eidos Montreal even attempted to recreate the film's actors? (The answer, we suspect, is probably something to do with Disney – as we've learned from our look into the development of *Kingdom Hearts III*, the company's not as forthcoming with technical support as it is with its feedback.)

But in among the wonkiness and the outdated 'cinematic' mechanics, there are glimpses of brilliance. The thirdperson brawling has the distinct look of *Spider-Man*'s combat: tough to efficiently set up and position, but easy to execute. There's something familiar about the way Thor

winds up his hammer for a throw that can ping away enemy shields, then recalls it – indeed, lead combat designer Vince Napoli was the man behind the most recent *God Of War*'s Leviathan Axe. And we soon understand why we're handed a set of headphones when we walk into the room: the audio work in *Marvel's Avengers* is nothing short of mighty.

We watch the demo handler, now controlling Captain America, hurl the iconic shield into a group of enemies: it ricochets off the walls and back towards our hero, who then roundhouse-kicks it right back into the last man standing. The sound of metal bouncing into metal vibrates so convincingly that it tickles our ears. Black Widow duels against Marvel villain Taskmaster, combining athletic close-quarters melee moves with pistol shots as his sword thwips through the air in search of her. Hulk is capable of picking up two goons at a time before piledriving them into the ground with a shuddering crunch.

Multiplayer missions will form a significant part of *Marvel's Avengers* (although we're shown precisely none of them) with each character's abilities designed to augment the others' in teamfights, and continual updates planned. That feels like a savvy choice for this particular superhero game: with some of the industry's brightest talents at the helm, there should be plenty of authentic Marvel here, in spite of what a dodgy-looking Downey Jr might suggest.



CARRION

Developer Phobia Game Studio **Publisher** Devolver Digital **Format** PC **Release** 2020

It takes about seven seconds – from the time we work out how to grab the screaming scientist, until the moment his body is digesting inside whatever our equivalent of a stomach is – for us to become a monster. *Carrion* excels at putting you into the mindset of the villain, a *The Thing*-like abomination escaping from its facility. Moving it around is frighteningly satisfying: tentacles latch onto our surroundings, propelling us along corridors and down chutes with sickening speed.

The objective is clear: find the exit, and cram as many humans into our maw as we can manage along the way. We grab one by the ankles, launching the thumbstick upwards to

dash his brains out against the ceiling, before settling in for a snack. This increases our size – but we soon find that squeezing through tiny gaps requires depositing some of our mass into a nearby hive of gristle for safekeeping. We need it back to smash a barrier elsewhere.

You collect new abilities as you progress, making *Carrion* a chaotic kind of *Metroidvania*. We worry, however, about being able to get to grips with them quickly. That seven seconds it takes us to become a monster is too long. If *Carrion* could manage to take us from zero to antihero in less than two, those scientists would really have to start praying.



ROLLER CHAMPIONS

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Montreal)
Format PC **Release** 2020

Two teams of three face off on an oval track that's essentially a giant half-pipe, and try to throw a ball through a circular goal on one of the walls. In order to score, a team must first retain possession of the ball for at least one full lap of the circuit. The winner is the first to five points; scoring after one lap nets you a point, but if you do another circuit you'll score three. Complete three laps, and you'll earn five points, ending the match instantly.

The result is a cheery mix of risk and reward, with the potential for dramatic late-game comebacks. Passing the ball naturally invites potential interceptions, while trying to go solo is also asking for trouble, since the camera is positioned close behind your avatar, making it hard to see what's coming up behind you. Another example of Ubisoft's willingness to veer off piste from time to time.

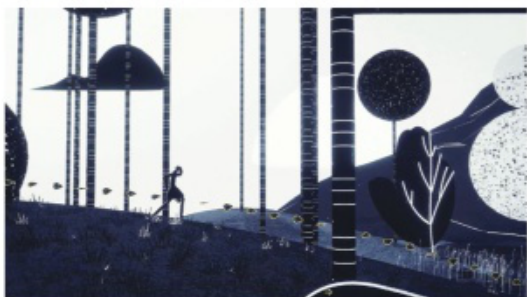


ZOMBIE ARMY 4

Developer/publisher Rebellion Developments
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2020

The winner of this E3's Ronseal award goes to the fourth entry in Rebellion's Nazi-zombie-slaying trilogy. The title tells you everything you need to know about a game that is content to shut up and play the hits. The undead surge at you from all directions; you'll pop heads, empty shells into chests, and from time to time be rewarded with a slow-mo killcam on loan from *Sniper Elite*.

This, it turns out, is all rather comforting – and when we come away from our hands-on session on the final afternoon of E3, we feel oddly cleansed. We've laid waste to several hundred undead, using powerful traps, beefy weapons and new abilities, and we feel a little better about the world as we head back out into the teeming, shuffling hordes on the show floor. We fall meekly in line, and stagger to our next appointment. It's been a long week.



GENESIS NOIR

Developer Feral Cat Den **Publisher** Fellow Traveller
Format PC **Release** 2020

The origin of the universe reimagined as a monochromatic, Raymond Chandler-esque drama? Well, why not. *Genesis Noir* tells the story of a "love triangle gone askew" at a place where Amanita Design meets *Kentucky Route Zero* for a relaxing evening of mellow jazz, moody visuals and cosmic weirdness. We have no idea how that little lot will shake out, but we're here for it all the same.



UNEXPLORED 2: THE WAYFARER'S LEGACY

Developer Ludomotion **Publisher** Big Sugar
Format PC **Release** 2020

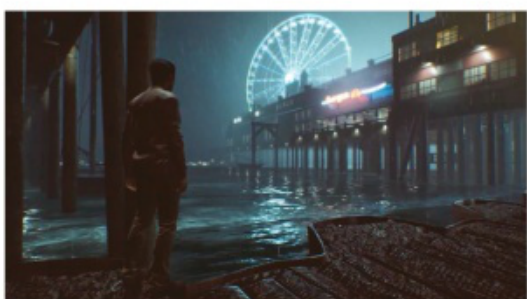
Venturing beyond the first game's procedurally generated dungeons, Big Sugar's sequel has a new Moebius-inspired art style, though don't be fooled: these great outdoors are every bit as hostile as the original's labyrinths. Death is permanent, but your actions in one run will ripple throughout the next. Even disastrous defeats have a silver lining – if only that you know to take a different route next time.



CHIVALRY II

Developer Torn Banner Studios **Publisher** Tripwire Interactive
Format PC **Release** 2020

"Half our audience plays the game drunk" may be the most disarmingly honest line we heard all E3, and *Chivalry II* is happy to lean into its sillier side: you can kill someone with a chicken. But it's taking its melee fighting seriously, too. Its objective-based multiplayer features mounted combat and supports up to 64 players, with more fluid controls making for easier limb removal – even when half-cut.



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES 2

Developer Hardsuit Labs **Publisher** Paradox Interactive
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2020

Over 16 years, *Bloodlines'* reputation has grown from cult to classic. No pressure on Hardsuit Labs, then – though original writer Brian Mitsoda returns alongside *Dreams'* Cara Ellison. Shifting the action to Seattle, it sees your vampire feeding on blood for sustenance and emotions to boost abilities. With a choice of three vampiric disciplines and five clans, it certainly shares its predecessor's ambition.



OUTRIDERS

Developer People Can Fly **Publisher** Square Enix
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2020

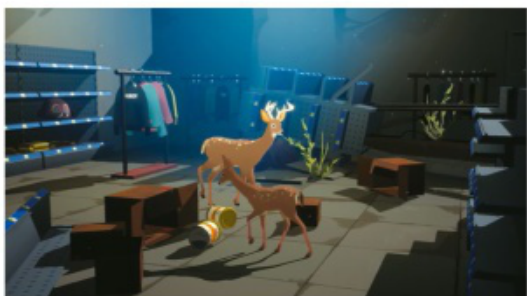
People Can Fly has staffed up for what the studio is calling its "most ambitious shooter to date", a story-led adventure in a "dark, unforgiving world" with drop-in/drop-out co-op for up to three players. Hints of *Gears* and *Monster Hunter* were evident in a teaser that otherwise gave little away, but if the ingredients sound familiar, *Bulletstorm* is proof that this team is capable of spinning gold from straw.



EMPIRE OF SIN

Developer Romero Games **Publisher** Paradox Interactive
Format PC, Switch **Release** 2020

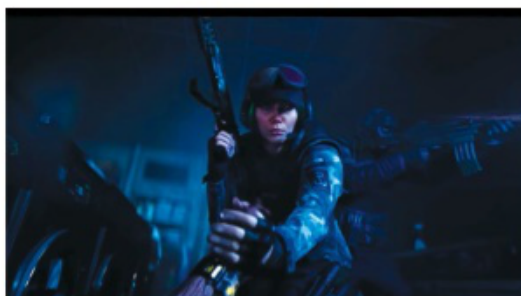
Brenda Romero's Prohibition-era strategy casts you as a mobster on the make. You'll engage rival gangs in top-down turn-based combat, unleashing Tommy-gun fire on rain-slicked streets and inside speakeasies. You've also got rackets to run, rivals to schmooze, and crew members to recruit. Their character traits can affect the rest of your gang, so be sure to find the right kind of bad influence.



WAY TO THE WOODS

Developer Anthony Tan **Publisher** TBC
Format PC, Xbox One **Release** 2020

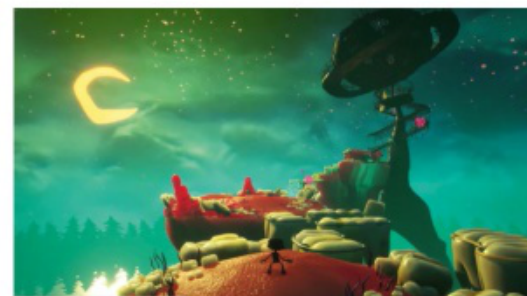
Lone dev Anthony Tan has gained and (amicably) lost a publisher since *Way To The Woods* was unveiled three years ago; still in his teens, he insists his darkly whimsical post-apocalyptic adventure will launch next year. Tan's delinquent deer make for mischievous leads, with the adult using their glowing antlers as a surrogate Oyster card to unlock barriers in a disused underground station.



TOM CLANCY'S RAINBOW SIX QUARANTINE

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Montreal)
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2020

The less-is-more approach worked for *Siege*, so we can understand why Ubisoft might want to repeat the trick with this co-op shooter, in which teams of three face off against victims of an alien virus. *Quarantine* shares plenty with its successful cousin (guns, gadgets and even returning operators) as the Clancification of Ubi's catalogue continues. You watch – next year, it'll be *Tom Clancy's Just Dance*.

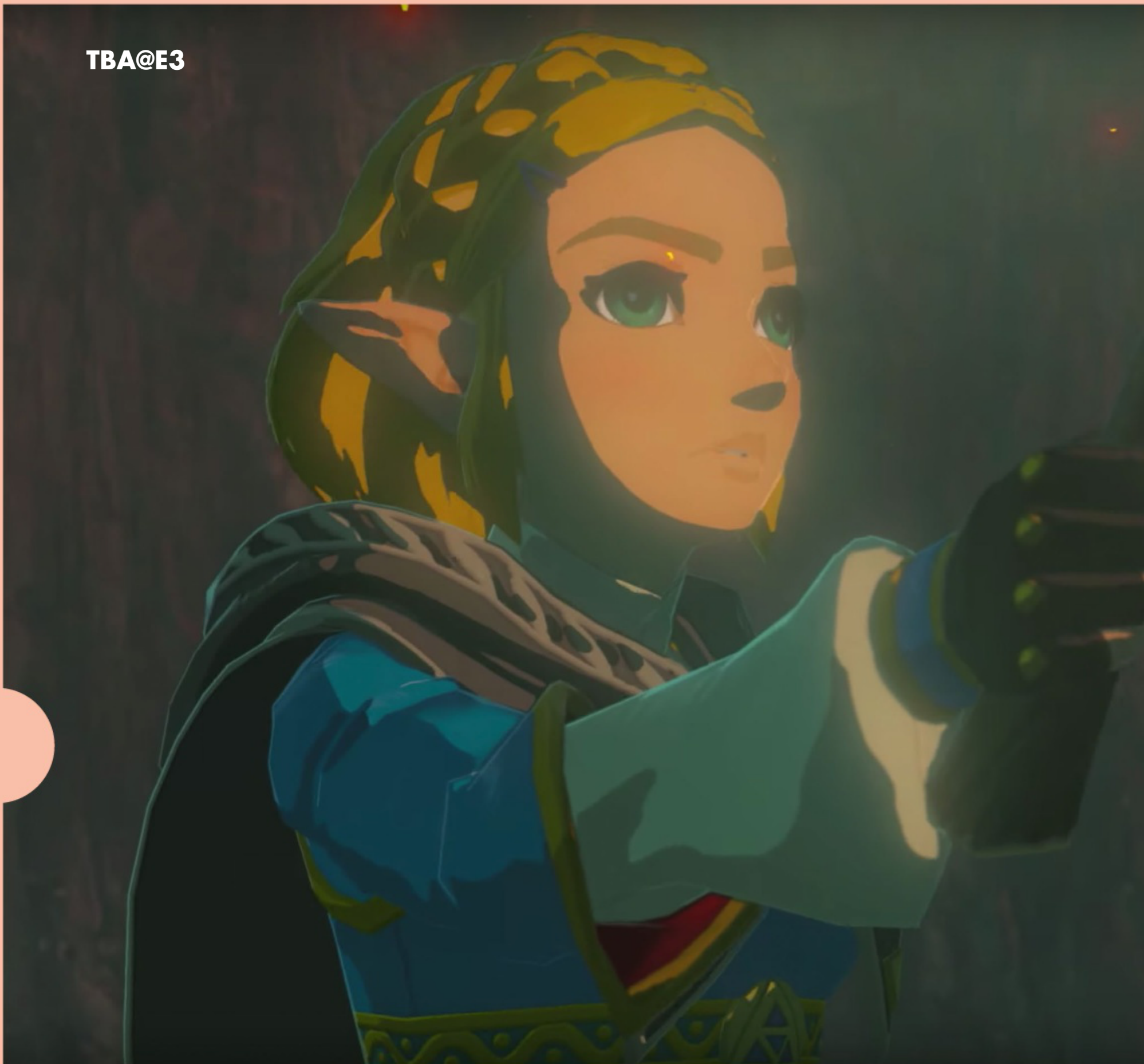


PSYCHONAUTS 2

Developer Double Fine Productions **Publisher** Xbox Game Studios **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2020

The big news at Xbox's show this year was that it had acquired Double Fine Productions and, by extension, *Psychonauts 2*. A smart move from Microsoft – the mind-bending 3D platformer feels fresh for a sequel to a 14-year-old game, with its gag-a-minute Dr. Loboto level also espousing the value of empathy – and Tim Schafer's lot alike, who are laughing all the way to the bank.

TBA@E3



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD 2

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD) **Format** Switch **Release** TBA

That surely won't be its title. But either way, the next mainline *Zelda* will be a sequel to a game that remains Switch's finest hour. There were enough clues in the accompanying snippets of what looks awfully like the game's opening cinematic that the closing 15-word caption ('The sequel to *The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild* is now in development') was hardly needed. Nevertheless, in an already

packed Direct, it comes as no great shock that this was the moment that provoked the most excitement. Telling, too, that Nintendo deemed it worthy of its final surprise – breaking its habit of waiting to show off games until they're reasonably close to release. But then *Breath Of The Wild* was no ordinary game, and this, by the looks of things, is no ordinary follow-up.



It could yet be closer than we think, though we're not getting our hopes too high. There is a precedent, of course: *Majora's Mask* was built upon the same foundation as its predecessor, arriving a mere two years after *Ocarina Of Time* – although, granted, we're not in the low-poly N64 era any more. This, too, looks like a follow-up of a darker hue, and we're not just talking about the caverns beneath Hyrule Castle, where this introduction appears to take place. The poisonous Malice unleashed by Calamity Ganon hasn't gone away, the sentient sludge claiming an unfortunate rodent. And it's swirling around a skeletal figure whose head suddenly snaps towards the camera, eyes glowing red. Ganondorf? Perhaps.

There are a few more hints. A glowing hand (reminiscent of Midna's prehensile hair) appears to be holding back the Malice – Link is

controlling it, which suggests a brand-new power. He's carrying the Master Sword, all but confirming that this will be set after the events of *Breath Of The Wild*. And Zelda, who features prominently, has had a haircut. *Cadence Of Hyrule* might have beaten Nintendo to the punch, but we'd welcome the opportunity to play as the princess at last.

Whatever Nintendo has in store, let's not forget that this will be the first new *Zelda* game to be built specifically for Switch. *Breath Of The Wild's* Wii U origins were evident in the Sheikah Slate, which had to be adapted for the newer hardware. Though Nintendo's desire to cater to handheld and TV mode simultaneously may rule out any IR pointer or motion-centric mechanics – beyond, presumably, optional gyro aiming – the prospect of a *Zelda* tailored towards the console's capabilities is mouthwatering. Another **Edge** 10? We wouldn't bet against it.

TBA@E3



ELDEN RING

Developer FromSoftware **Publisher** Bandai Namco Entertainment **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** TBA

This was, in a way, the most disappointing thing to come out of E3 2019 – if only because it actually spilled out a few days before it. The sight, 30-odd seconds into *Elden Ring*'s announcement trailer, of the words "A new world created by Hidetaka Miyazaki and George RR Martin" should have sent the crowd at the Microsoft press conference into raptures, the surprise news of a collaboration between the brains behind *Dark Souls* and *Game Of Thrones* making for an E3 'moment' that would be talked about for years to come. Instead, the reaction in the room was depressingly muted.

You can't help but feel for Miyazaki. News of *Bloodborne*, *Dark Souls III* and *Sekiro* all snuck out ahead of their official unveilings, and this continues the streak. It is a compliment of sorts, we suppose, that the gaming Internet is so eager to find out what you are working on next. We doubt Miyazaki takes too much comfort in it. We'd heard he was especially upset about the *Dark Souls III* leak, and as such his decision to partner with Namco again comes as a surprise – and possibly one he now regrets, since the leak was due to a security flaw on the publisher's website that saw its entire E3 slate revealed the week before the show. Whoops.

Still, with the disappointment out of the way, there's a tremendous amount to be excited about.

George RR Martin has written the "overarching mythos" for the new game, Miyazaki says

The headline act is Martin, of course, who joined the project after From's head of business development sent an enquiry on a whim, which led to an unlikely face-to-face meeting and, eventually, a full collaboration. Martin has written the "overarching mythos" for the game, Miyazaki says; given the former's habit of killing off beloved characters and what the latter did to Solaire, it's a match made in – well, not quite heaven, but you get the point. Even before the collab was on the cards, Miyazaki was a fan, and recommended new staff read Martin's 1982 vampire novel *Fevre Dream* as an intro to the studio's approach to story and world-building.

The latter is being taken to new heights in the biggest game From has made. *Elden Ring* is set across a large open world, though by the sounds of it it will be rather an empty one, with Miyazaki feeling that trying to build busy towns and cities would have been a job too far for the development team. Castles and dungeons will feature the classic FromSoft interlocking level design; after *Sekiro* it's a return to FromSoft house style with character customisation, ranged, melee and magical combat and RPG elements. The only question mark is over platforms: From says it's being made for PC, PS4 and Xbox One, but if anything can sell us a new console, it's this.



GHOSTWIRE: TOKYO

Developer Tango Gameworks **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks **Format** TBA **Release** TBA

There was a moment at Bethesda's conference – in among the *Fallout 76* backpedalling, the “Thanks to you, the gamers” video montages and the impassioned screeching from one guy in an Elder Memes T-shirt – of genuine heart. Shinji Mikami announced his studio's new project, *GhostWire: Tokyo*. Then he handed over to a nervous but utterly charismatic creative director Ikumi Nakamura, who revealed more details.

GhostWire: Tokyo is a departure from Tango's usual survival-horror shtick, an exploration-focused adventure game that has you unravelling a supernatural mystery at the heart of Japan's capital city. People are disappearing from the streets,

and you investigate conspiracies and converse with spirits to figure out why. There's a glimpse of a bow, and a fireball spell shot from a hand, alongside some stunning character designs: with concept art for *Okami*, *Bayonetta* and *The Evil Within* under Nakamura's belt, that's hardly surprising.

If *GhostWire* is as ‘haunted *Yakuza*’ as it sounds, we're going to lose our minds. But quite apart from that, it was heartening to see Mikami pass the torch to a protégée, and something we hope becomes tradition on the big stage. It reminded us that E3 can still play an important role: not just to celebrate games, but the people behind them too.



BALDUR'S GATE III

Developer Larian Studios **Publisher** Wizards Of The Coast
Format PC, Stadia **Release** TBA

The tabletop RPG revival continues apace with the resurrection of a sequel originally announced 17 years ago and cancelled the following year when publisher Interplay's bankruptcy led to the closure of Black Isle Studios. It's hard not to feel for Beamdog, whose Enhanced Editions of the first two games have helped keep the series alive in recent years. Even so, *Baldur's Gate* could hardly have fallen into better hands. The *Divinity* games are evidence that Larian Studios is capable of doing the series justice, even with a couple of decades of expectation heaped on its shoulders. Still, the announcement raised eyebrows, and not just because it was revealed by Google in its pre-E3 presser for Stadia: a CG trailer featuring scenes of gruesome body horror isn't how we'd have expected *Baldur's Gate* to announce its return. Nevertheless, in Larian we trust.



DEATHLOOP

Developer Arkane Lyon **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks
Format TBA **Release** TBA

Time loops were a popular theme at this year's show, but there's a catchy narrative kink in this one. Arkane Lyon's firstperson assassin sim pitches two opponents against each other in a battle of wills. Each time they die, they wake up again in a different location: Colt is out to break the cycle of death and rebirth he believes is imprisoning him, while Julianna wants to protect it, enjoying her immortality. *Deathloop's* creators promise it will be “unlike anything the studio has done before.” The other Arkane studio had us choose between two different playable characters in *Dishonored 2*, so we hope that means this is something more unique. We're probably dreaming too big, and who knows if it'd even be fun – but if it's as bonkers as your rival in each loop being another player, we'll be straight on a flight to (politely) batter down Lyon's door.



THE WILD AT HEART

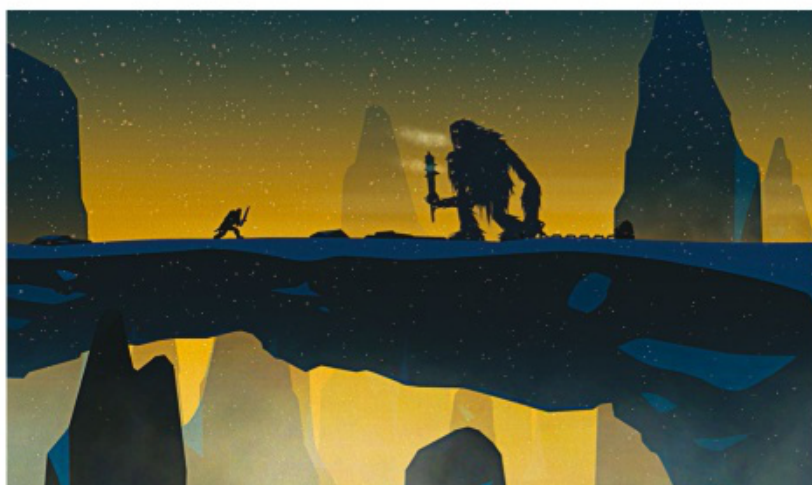
Developer/publisher Moonlight Kids **Format** PC, Xbox One **Release** TBA

Spritelings can really take some punishment. No sooner have we begun playing this *Pikmin*-esque adventure than we've accidentally hurled one into a river and another into a swarm of bees. In fairness, chucking a Spriteling at a problem is often the solution in *The Wild at Heart*. But the bees may have been a bit hasty. We do feel guilty about the bees.

But the onion-headed helper trots back, waiting patiently for us to work out that we need to suck up the obstacle with our portable vacuum cleaner. On the other side, Moonlight Kids' first area blooms out before our feet. It shimmers with a natural warmth and whimsy that perfectly evokes childhood

idyll: a makeshift den is your crafting hub, where you can make useful items such as popping-candy-powered bombs. In doing so, you'll find more ways to open up paths and shortcuts – and new types of Spriteling, who can do likewise.

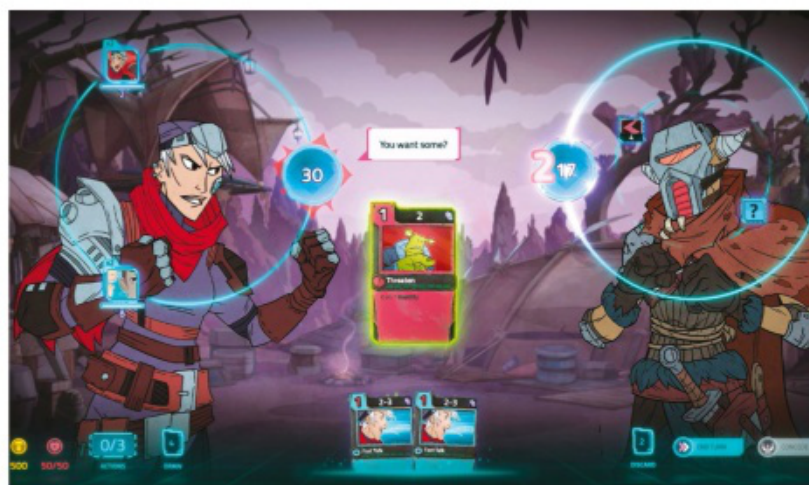
We fight a bullfrog and perform a quest for a giant ferret, who lives among a clutch of abandoned arcade machines and would like to eat us. In case you hadn't guessed from the magical imps, all is not as it seems: we're told the cosy style is a key part of a more sobering tale about escapism. And while there are no real mechanical revelations yet, an otherworldly atmosphere and sparkling writing has us buzzing.



UNTO THE END

Developer/publisher 2 Ton Studios
Format PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Release** TBA

The word that springs to mind when we think of *Unto The End* is 'focus'. It puts you in the shoes of a father (isn't it always?) who must battle his way across a hostile land to reunite with his family. The emphasis is on elevating its nuanced 2D combat as much as possible, the minimalist *Another World*-esque art style and carefully timed animations ensuring that the complexities of reading, reacting to and countering your foes are clear. With ranged weapons, you'll strike tactically from afar; with swords, you'll strike high and low, block incoming blows, or perform a huge swing to decapitate your opponent. Each scenario is handcrafted, with enemies having their own backstories and motivations to lend weight to each fight. This is a refined concept, painstakingly executed, and it's out to encourage the same level of poise from its players.



GRIFTLANDS

Developer/publisher Klei Entertainment
Format PC **Release** TBA

After *Slay The Spire* and *SteamWorld Quest*, Klei's hoping you've room for one more deck-building RPG in your life. *Griftlands* has been revamped since its initial unveiling a couple of years back, and as with the likes of *Don't Starve* and *Oxygen Not Included* the studio is releasing an alpha (available as you read this) to gather feedback and refine it further, with a full launch at least a year away.

It's a roguelite, too, and a tough one, but there's more than one way to deal with anyone who gets in your way. If you're struggling to deal with a pair of bandits in a Mos-Eisley-style cantina, you can get a round in for the aliens at the bar, and you'll have some muscle to back you up in a brawl. You'll also have cards to play in dialogue exchanges, as a kind of conversational combat to fast-talk or wheedle tight-lipped NPCs into spilling their guts.



HOLLOW KNIGHT: SILKSONG

Developer/publisher Team Cherry **Format** PC, Switch **Release** TBA

Perhaps a sequel to Team Cherry's exquisite *Metroidvania* was inevitable. By the devs' own admission, *Hollow Knight's* subterranean world practically flows out of its creators – had they not needed lunch money, they might have gone on happily adding to their insect kingdom forever. But they released it, and it sold multiple millions, and now a fresh supply of sandwiches is fuelling the development of *Hollow Knight: Silksong*.

It stars the first game's princess-warrior Hornet, on an adventure of her very own. Dropped into the bottommost layer of an ancient realm, Farloom, she must embark on a journey of discovery that mirrors the Knight's: a treacherous ascent to the kingdom's peak. And she's well-equipped, too. Hornet is a more natural acrobat than the podgy little hero of the first game, with a higher jump and new, nimble mantling. (As in the first game, you'll acquire even more movement abilities as you progress.) Instead of the previous game's magical charms, Hornet uses 'tools' that you pay to replenish at benches, such as the shuriken-like Straight Pins.

But her main advantage is her needle. At once weapon and mobility aid, it makes diverse use of the supply of silk you earn from striking enemies, presenting some tough choices during combat challenges. You can use a portion of your spool to throw your needle like a grappling hook, zipping across the

screen to avoid attacks or reposition for your own – or spend the whole thing on a large and instantaneous heal.

It's a marked departure from *Hollow Knight's* slower, more measured version, reflecting the faster pace, but still retains the essential risk-reward strategy. If you're hit during healing, you'll waste the entire spool. Still, there's another way to give yourself the edge over *Silksong's* toughest challenges. While the Knight dropped a Shade upon death that would attack you upon your return before you killed it to recover your currency, Hornet leaves behind a benign cocoon of silk. If a boss is giving you trouble, for instance, you might want to leave breaking the stash open until the enemy's most dangerous phase.

So much of Team Cherry's mastery of the genre is in its fine mechanical balance, presided over by William Pellen. But the magic of a *Hollow Knight* game comes from its atmosphere, the tiny design details and surprises, and it's already obvious that designer Ari Gibson's in his element in *Silksong* with 150 new enemy types and plenty of enchanting NPCs. It's a winning formula that needs no significant alteration, and *Silksong* sensibly isn't changing much, simply offering a new set of excuses to explore the work of some of the best – and most natural – world-builders in the industry.

TBA@E3



BLEEDING EDGE

Developer Ninja Theory Publisher Xbox Game Studios Format PC, Xbox One Release TBA

Life is tough for the colourful, character-led competitive team game in a post-*Overwatch* world. Comparisons are inevitable, and often unflattering – and *Bleeding Edge* openly invites them. There are differences: this is a thirdperson game, focused largely on melee combat, with the action playing out between two teams of four. But Ninja Theory has been working on this for over three years, and its team has clearly been playing Blizzard's multiplayer shooter in that time – and taking notes. From what we've seen, we wonder whether the right lessons have been learned.

The character design is stellar, at least, with a roster that immediately gets the thumbs twitching. Robotic metalhead Nidhoggr has a flamethrower built into his throat. Big-bellied Buttercup can transform herself into a motorbike, while Maeve is a sprightly old witch with a penchant for trapping opponents in magical birdcages. Each has their own set of basic attack and movement abilities (which cost stamina to use), special moves on cooldowns, plus an ultimate with which to turn a fight in your favour. You unlock mods as you play, too, with which you can create custom builds.

We opt to play as hoverchair-piloting support coder Zero Cool. Here, too, are the teachings of *Overwatch*: a healing beam reminiscent of Mercy's, our low mobility requiring clever positioning if we

want to stay alive. We know immediately where to deploy our wall to cut off an enemy assassin from their support – we've done it before as Mei. We watch Buttercup hook players towards her just like Roadhog, and Genji – er, *Daemon* throw shuriken and slice through foes with a katana.

The match sees us fight for control of three points. The empty arena is much too large for melee-focused frays – especially as the camera is more zoomed-out than the reveal trailer might suggest – and puts us in mind of a MOBA map minus the minions or towers. To help justify this, each character has a summonable hoverboard: we sneakily backcap a point, but have to wait an age before everybody else catches up.

Our biggest concern is that *Bleeding Edge* hasn't emulated *Overwatch*'s greatest trick: a constant, clear and diverse range of audiovisual feedback. It's hard to know what's hitting you from where – and we can barely tell when we've used our ultimate, which should be one of the most impactful feelings in the game. *Battleborn* was much the same: inventive character design and some nice ideas, but a muddled execution. Thankfully, a lesson's been learned there, too. Game Pass could be the key to helping *Bleeding Edge*'s characters charm a large enough audience to give it a shot at forming an identity of its own.

The character design is stellar, at least, with a roster that immediately gets the thumbs twitching



WASTELAND 3

Developer InXile Entertainment **Publisher** Xbox Game Studios **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** TBA

If you're one of the seven people who read the info boxes: no, your eyes aren't deceiving you. Despite InXile Entertainment's acquisition late last year by Xbox Game Studios, *Wasteland 3* will still be coming to Sony hardware. Then again, a Microsoft-published game on a rival format is less of a novelty since it bought Mojang and continued to support *Minecraft* everywhere. Regardless, it's been expanded from the version that was crowdfunded to the tune of over \$3 million on Fig. Its planned end-of-2019 launch was a little optimistic, but it's not too far away. In the meantime, backers can get on an alpha next month and an Early Access beta in the autumn. And they

can expect to see at least one familiar face: *Wasteland 2*'s heavy-drinking hobo Scotchmo will join Team November, a ranger squad surviving in post-apocalyptic Colorado Springs.

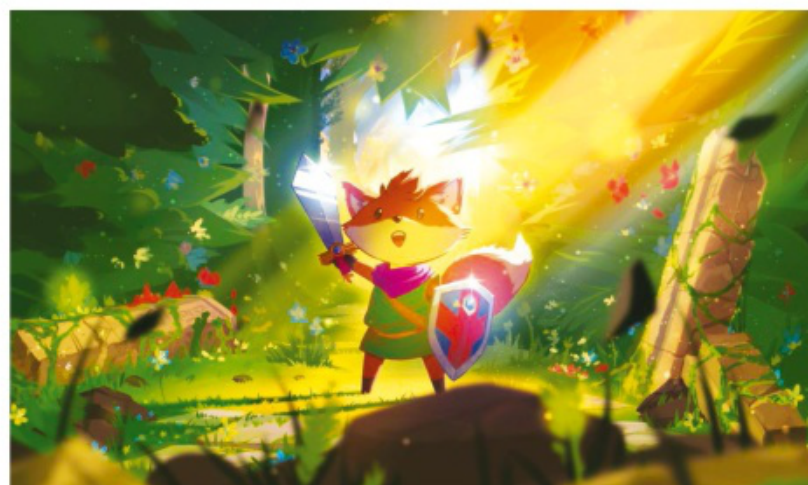
The series' turn-based tactical combat has been bolstered by vehicles, which can be used as mobile cover and an extra weapon. There's multiplayer, too: you can tackle missions together or asynchronously. And InXile has borrowed *Torment: Tides Of Numenera*'s branching dialogue system. What we've seen suggests *Wasteland 3* will be more light-hearted than the second game – though we hope its eccentricities are deployed more sparingly than the slightly grating trailer suggests.



MIDNIGHT GHOST HUNT

Developer Vaulted Sky Games **Publisher** Coffee Publishing
Format PC **Release** TBA

Prop Hunt has a long history in videogames, starting with a hide-and-seek mod in *Counter-Strike* before evolving into modes in *Team Fortress 2*, *Garry's Mod* and now even *Fortnite*. In it, players disguise themselves as objects to hide from a team of hunters, resulting in devious psych-out tactics and immortal images such as a lamp losing its composure and running away. *Midnight Ghost Hunt* takes it a step further. It pits four ghostbusters against four spirits: the latter must survive until midnight by possessing objects. But there's a twist: if found, the ghosts can fight back, knocking out the hunters to buy time. For ghosts, the key will be splitting up hunters – possessing doors to shut them in different rooms, for instance – and using each object's unique characteristics to their advantage. We can hear the YouTube mob's hands rubbing together from here.



TUNIC

Developer Andrew Shouldice **Publisher** Finji
Format PC, Xbox One **Release** TBA

We like *Zelda*, you like *Zelda*, and solo developer Andrew Shouldice likes *Zelda*. So, here is *Zelda*, but if Link were a fox. Well, if he had the *appearance* of a fox: he doesn't have the capabilities of one, which to the best of our knowledge involve getting into bins and evading Tories. Instead, he can hold and swing a sword to beat up spiders and slimes, and flip switches to open passageways. He can also read – sort of. One of *Tunic*'s more unusual ideas is an untranslatable language that obscures certain information: which path leads where, or which items do what. In a meta twist, it's often found on pages of *Tunic*'s own game manual hidden in chests, a nod to Shouldice's childhood spent marvelling at the Japanese manual for *Final Fantasy*. Otherwise, this is an adventure that invokes precisely what it means to, and adeptly fills a niche in Microsoft's lineup.

TBA@E3



JOHN WICK HEX

Developer Bithell Games Publisher Good Shepherd Entertainment Format PC Release TBA

John Wick doesn't wait his turn. For a brief while, he did: Bithell Games' original idea for its officially licensed videogame was an *XCOM*-style turn-based game with a single playable character. And then Lionsgate stepped in. "The executives were like, 'Why is John waiting his turn?'" lead developer Mike Bithell says. "I said, 'Well, that's the genre'. And then hearing myself say that, I was like, 'You're an idiot – you're getting it wrong.'"

We'd tell Bithell to stop being so hard on himself, but the stern talking-to undoubtedly paid off. *John Wick Hex* is as graceful and assured as the gun-fu assassin himself, a cerebral yet stylish strategy game built around the *Superhot*-esque philosophy of 'Time only moves when you do'. A timeline at the top of the screen makes clear the details of your window of opportunity – down to the nearest tenth of a second. Mouse over a guard, and you can measure the timelines for each of Wick's possible actions against the enemy's.

We might be fast enough to perform a two-second takedown on a nearby guard, for instance, but do we have time to duck behind cover before the one who's just entered the room shoots us? The timeline says no – but we could roll the dice on the 70% chance they have of hitting their target. A strike, however, would save us half a second, and

we're well positioned enough that it has the same chance of success. A few clicks later, and Wick has duly executed one – *Hex* also lets him move *through* the strike as he does in the films, offering a free repositioning step on the other side – before turning and firing at the second guard. When larger gangs arrive, the possibilities multiply. We can take the time to crouch to increase our focus, and thereby our chances of hitting shots; on the other hand dodge-rolling depletes it (even John Wick gets dizzy, it turns out) so we can't overly rely on evasive manoeuvres.

Hex is a slow-motion dissection of Wick's mind – although, after you finish cutting together your fight scene, you'll be able to watch the level replay in realtime. It's certainly not what we'd expect from a licensed game, and that's exactly why it feels so fresh. Lionsgate deliberately went the unconventional route in seeking out Bithell: after all, why not get the guy who made the game about talking rectangles to handle it? "The way Lionsgate think of John Wick is still as that little indie film that blew up," he says. "Their whole thing is, it would be wrong to make a John Wick game that was easy [to make]. It should be original – even genre-defining, dare I say." It's nice to hear that Bithell's got his confidence back: on this evidence, it's well-founded.

As graceful and assured as the gun-fu assassin himself, a cerebral yet stylish strategy game



SNIPER ELITE VR

Developer Just Add Water **Publisher** Rebellion Developments **Format** PSVR, Rift, Vive **Release** TBA

We're apprehensive as we sit down with *Sniper Elite VR*, as our demo handler asks how comfortable we are in virtual reality – experience tells us this is rarely a good sign. Then he explains that the current build of the game only supports free movement, and our stomach lurches before we've even put on the headset. Teleportation is the standard in firstperson games with good reason, after all, and while we're assured Rebellion and Just Add Water are working on it, it's not ready yet.

We needn't have worried: we use the skip turn option, which rotates your perspective 90° instantly, but we're not sure we needed it. Character movement is slow, and there's no

head-bob. And we spend most of the game gazing down the scope of our WWII-era sniper rifle, only moving a few yards between vantage points as we clear Nazis from a town.

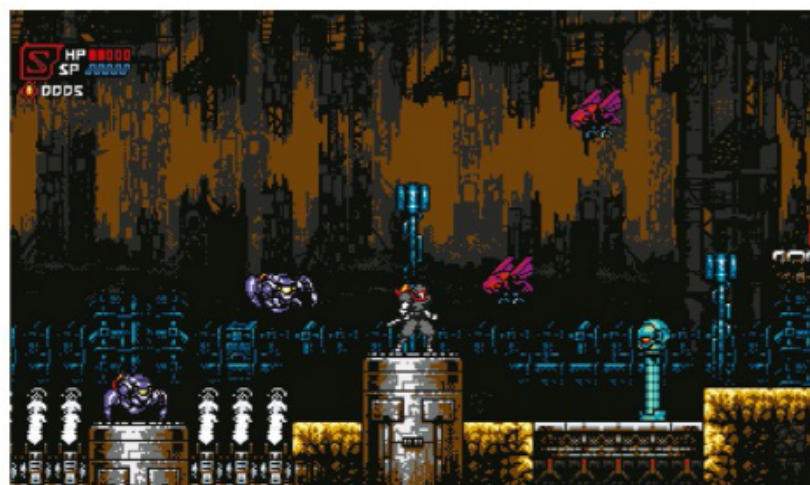
Like another of the games on Rebellion's E3 slate, *Zombie Army 4*, everything you need to know about *Sniper Elite VR* is there in the name. It's a game of patient, perfect aim, punctuated by gruesome killcams (a whiteboard in the demo area tracks the names of every E3 player to score a testicle kill), and it is in virtual reality. It's a fine fit for the PlayStation Aim controller, too. We leave satisfied, our stomachs unturned – and, yes, with our name on the whiteboard.



STARMANCER

Developer Ominux Games **Publisher** Chucklefish
Format PC **Release** TBA

Having enjoyed playing an AI of ambiguous intent keeping tabs on a single astronaut in *Observation*, we're rather keen on the idea of getting to look after – or screw with – thousands more. In Chucklefish's new game, you play as a supercomputer, upon whose memory banks are stored the minds of millions of humans seeking refuge from a ruined Earth. Once you've built and customised the space station in which you'll make your interstellar journey, you'll be able to staff up by uploading those consciousnesses into new human hosts. You can choose to make their home a pleasant place to live and work; alternatively, you can watch impassively as they go mad and beat one another up – or, if you attract the wrong kind of attention, destroyed (and possibly eaten) by space pirates. But no matter: if your colonists perish, you can always grow some more.



CYBER SHADOW

Developer Aarne Hunziker **Publisher** Yacht Club Games
Format PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Release** TBA

Shovel Knight has proven such a success for Yacht Club Games that it's now looking to publish what it hopes will be the next one. *Cyber Shadow's* classical influences may be a little different – *Strider* and *Ninja Gaiden* are the obvious touchstones – but it's cut from a similar cloth. Call it 8bit plus: it looks like a game from the NES era, though in motion it's clearly faster, smoother and more responsive than it could have been back then. Developer Aarne Hunziker, who's been making it for the best part of a decade, has even paid cheeky tribute to his new publisher with a *Shovel-Knight*-style down-attack which lets you bounce off enemies using your sword. A year's worth of polish has left it looking razor-sharp; it has competition from *The Messenger* and *Katana Zero* in the old-school slice-'em-up stakes, but we reckon this could be a cut above.



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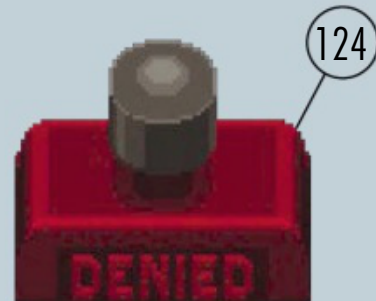
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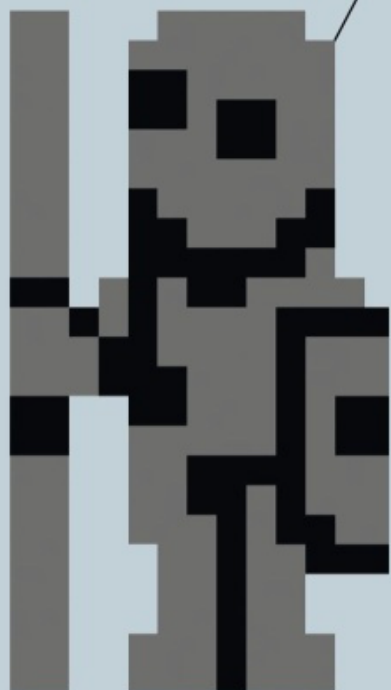
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Respawn channels the
greats of Japanese action to
deliver, at last, a Star Wars
game worthy of the name

By **NATHAN BROWN**

Game *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order*
Developer Respawn Entertainment
Publisher Electronic Arts
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Release November 15

zenning







Protagonist Cal Kestis may look like he was designed by committee, but in fact he's played by Gotham actor Cameron Monaghan



Game director Stig Asmussen

here is nothing so satisfying in games as a perfectly timed parry. Anticipation, reaction, execution; defence turned into attack, momentum reversed in an instant. It is everything we love about action games distilled into a single button press: high risk and high reward, a move that makes you feel like a god when it comes off and might just kill you if you get it wrong. It's a surprising foundation for a Star Wars game, but there's a lot that's unexpected about *Jedi: Fallen Order*. You'd be forgiven for thinking that Respawn Entertainment's first foray into the action-adventure genre would be a straightforward linear romp, and that its hack-and-slash combat would be an expression of the Jedi power fantasy, the protagonist cutting an easy swathe through all before him. Yet this planet-hopping, nonlinear adventure shares a level-design ethos with the likes of *Metroid* and *Dark Souls*. There are rest points that respawn enemies and refill your limited stock of healing items, levels that corkscrew back on themselves through ingenious shortcuts, and new abilities that open up pathways to previously inaccessible areas. And in combat? Over the course of our 45-minute demo we die more times than we can count.

Little of this was apparent in *Fallen Order's* formal unveiling during EA Play, its publisher's E3 spin-off that takes place a few days before the show proper. The demo sells it as precisely the sort of linear action-adventure you might expect: *Uncharted* with a lightsaber, or *Tomb Raider* with Force powers. In combat, the game is simply

being played too well. It all looks too easy. Behind closed doors at E3 a few days later, we discover the reality is very different. An extended, wave-based gauntlet intended as a combat tutorial instead shows us all the ways in which it is possible to die.

Much of it, however, is our fault – and while we'd love to blame it on jetlag, the real culprit is muscle memory. Parrying's no problem at all: mapped to the left bumper, the timing window at its widest setting for demo purposes and this being far from our first rodeo with thousands of hours of FromSoft experience, we comfortably fend off most enemy attacks. Instinctively, we tap the right bumper for the follow-up. In *Sekiro*, that's a sword swing; in *Dark Souls*, a riposte. Here it's Force Slow, and using it against a parried enemy does absolutely nothing, our opponent's stagger animation playing out, their stance resetting to neutral. We apologise to our demo handler, and laugh it off. The first time, anyway. By the 20th, it is starting to get embarrassing.

Yet the fact that a licensed Star Wars game published by Electronic Arts should have us summoning our Soulsborne instincts is remarkable. And to its credit, Respawn happily acknowledges the influence of Hidetaka Miyazaki's work. "I've been a huge FromSoftware fan since *King's Field*," game director **Stig Asmussen** tells us. "I mean, *King's Field II* is one of my favourite games ever. But it's not about you liking a game, and trying to make that game yourself. It's more, 'What can we learn about what's fun about it?'" ►

The basic troopers use batons to block your lightsaber, a way of communicating early on that you won't stampede through the game. "It's one of the first things we introduce, a kind of goalposting for the player," de Heras says









Lead combat designer
Jason de Heras

BD-1, Cal's helper droid, took Respawn over two years to design. Inspired in part by both Snoopy and Woodstock, the droid's voice was created by legendary Star Wars audio designer Ben Burtt

On this evidence, Respawn has learned plenty. Once we finally manage to rewire our brains and adjust to *Fallen Order's* button layout, everything clicks into place, and when it does it's sumptuous. The game maps its basic moves to the face buttons – light and heavy attacks, a jump that has little use in combat, and a dodge that can be double-tapped for a longer evasive roll or, with the stick in neutral, performs some delicious *God Hand*-style bobs and weaves. Up on the shoulder buttons is a block button that, when properly timed, triggers the parry. The remaining inputs are for Force powers, which is where we initially come unstuck – and at times become a little overwhelmed, since we're given the complete toolset from the word go (in the full game, you'll unlock them piecemeal during the campaign). Using a meter that fills as you land basic attacks, you can use Force push, pull or slow. Stronger variants, once unlocked, are performed by holding down the button.

That's your lot, though really it is only the start. Of far greater importance is the suite of enemies you'll face, each of which has been designed around a different part of protagonist Cal's toolset. While you can notionally play this like any other melee action game – blocking or dodging incoming blows, then hitting things with your lightsaber until they fall over – each enemy type demands a slight tweak in your approach. Your primary goal is to break their guard, draining a meter through attacks, blocks and parries. Asmussen and several members of the development team joined the studio from Sony Santa Monica, where they'd worked on the *God Of War* series (Asmussen was game director on *GOWIII*). They wanted something different.

They call it 'thoughtful combat'. "That was always the number one objective," lead combat designer **Jason de Heras** tells us. "It came from, 'Right, we're working on Star Wars. You're a Jedi; you have a lightsaber. What do we want

EACH OF THE ENEMIES HAS BEEN DESIGNED AROUND A DIFFERENT PART OF PROTAGONIST CAL'S TOOLSET

to do to really give it authenticity?' We knew we didn't want to do something like *God Of War*, where you're just hitting a basic enemy 50 times. We wanted to dial it back. We wanted to make the player understand everything in the combat playspace, so each enemy is kind of like a puzzle."

The lowest class of enemy trooper wields an electrified baton that, it quickly transpires, can block your attacks. Stronger foes can block, then counter you. The hulking security droid has attacks that can't be guarded or parried, only dodged (its body glowing red to signify the incoming blow). Flamethrower-bearing troopers put up an impassable fiery wall, forcing you to learn their reload timings. All the while, far-off enemies chip away at you with blaster fire – a perfect parry will return it to sender for a one-shot kill – or rockets, and it's in the latter case that we first begin to incorporate Force powers into our approach. Yes, you can do things the old-fashioned way, weaving your way in and out of incoming ordnance and closing in for a melee kill. But a well-timed Force push will turn the rocket on a sixpence and deal with the problem for you. Push one of the flamethrower troopers into a wall and its backpack full of fuel will explode; do so near a ledge and they'll fall to their death. Slow and pull come into their own when you're facing multiple targets and must prioritise and isolate the biggest threats.

Crowd management is vital, and so is a strong defence – the rank and file hit hard enough on their own, but as we progress through the training gauntlet and the screen becomes busier with different enemy types, things quickly turn brutal. Yes, a perfect parry, and the immensely satisfying, wonderfully animated finishing moves that follow a guard break, deliver the power fantasy. Get it right, and enemies die quickly. But get it wrong, and so do you. De Heras admits that, when ►

ION DRIVE

This is a surprising game from front to back, but perhaps the greatest shock is Respawn's choice of engine. Over the course of this generation, EA has worked to turn Frostbite from the *Battlefield* engine into the tech that powers all the publisher's games. Respawn, meanwhile, has always worked in a custom-modified version of Valve's Source engine. Why, then, is *Fallen Order* being made in Unreal? Game director Stig Asmussen says it was initially about the ability to be flexible, thanks to the engine's Blueprinting feature, when the team was small. "A lot of people could wear a lot of different hats," he says. "On the original demo, and even the early days of *Star Wars*, I was doing VFX and sound placement. People were just chipping in on what they wanted." He does, however, admit to having held a personal interest in it for years. "When I was at Sony, it always looked like something that was really sexy. I really wanted to figure out what the big buzz was about Unreal. It's been great."



studying past Star Wars games to identify what worked and didn't, the *Jedi Knight* series – and *Jedi Academy* in particular – stuck out a mile. "Those games really sold the lethality of the lightsaber," he says. "The controls were pretty straightforward, and enemies died pretty fast. We knew that, from a high level, we wanted to make it feel more like that, as opposed to something like *Force Unleashed*, which is more of a Force power fantasy, a game where you could take on hordes of enemies and lift giant ships. We were constrained by the kind of story we were trying to tell – this authentic, canon-based game. You wouldn't see, in the movies right now, somebody lifting a Star Destroyer."

Nostalgia is key to the enduring appeal of Star Wars, but it's a different kind of memory that comes rushing back to us as we play *Fallen Order*. This time last year, we were sat in another of the LA Convention Center's upstairs meeting rooms. We were speaking to Hidetaka Miyazaki about the newly announced *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*, a game of timing and skill about breaking an enemy's defences with perfectly timed parries, one in which enemies die fast and the player quicker still. We wonder how the announcement of a mechanically very similar game went down at the LA studio, which was already deep into development of *Fallen Order*. De Heras laughs. "I thought it was pretty badass, and a little comforting to know that you could make this type of game without a stamina bar. They let you attack, they let you roll, they do all this for free – and then the AI will tell you if you're doing the correct thing. It just confirmed to us that you don't have to limit everything the player does; let them have a little more agency, and then let the AI give them a slap on the wrist, or a punch in the face. It was a positive thing for us to know there was a game that was similar to ours. Very similar."

Purge troopers, with their dual purple blades, are the first major roadblock you'll face: it'll take multiple parries to break their guard. If that doesn't sound enough like a Respawn game then, rest assured, there's plenty of wall-running

"WE WERE CONSTRAINED BY THE KIND OF STORY WE WERE TRYING TO TELL – THIS AUTHENTIC GAME"

Remarkably given EA's track record with the Star Wars licence, it's a flattering comparison, and vindication for Respawn CEO Vince Zampella's decision, in 2013, to start a secondary team within the *Titanfall* studio to build thirdperson action games. Asmussen was at Sony Santa Monica when Respawn was founded in 2010, and knew Zampella socially – the LA dev scene, he says, is "a small town". The studio, formed after Zampella and co-founder Jason West left *Call Of Duty* developer Infinity Ward over a royalty dispute, was immediately the talk of the town, and several members of Asmussen's team quit Sony and took up with Respawn. "We were bleeding a lot of people," he says. "It was getting kind of depressing." Before long, Zampella got in touch. He wanted Respawn to make action-adventures. He was talking to EA about making a Star Wars game, and wanted Asmussen to build the team.

Asmussen turned him down: at Santa Monica he was game director on a project he was very excited about. There were hundreds of people on his team, and he couldn't simply leave them behind. Before long, Sony made his decision for him, cancelling the project and laying off a hefty chunk of the development team. The news broke the same day, and Zampella called Asmussen to say the offer still stood. He quit and, after a month off to recharge, joined Respawn as the first member of its new team. He and Zampella quickly sketched out a few ideas for a Star Wars game, but EA decided to go in a different direction. "We said, 'Well, we'll start a new IP, and we'll start building up a team'."

Asmussen's fledgling crew rose to five people while he pulled together ideas for 13 different games, and circulated them among the staff. One stood out, and the crew started fiddling around in Unreal Engine; within a year headcount was up to a dozen, and they had a playable demo ready ▶

LINK TO THE PAST

Dark Souls wasn't the only Japanese influence on *Fallen Order*'s combat: Asmussen and co were also drawn to *The Legend Of Zelda: The Wind Waker*, since they knew they would need an equivalent to Z-targeting in a game about patient crowd control. "Early on we were probably looking at *Wind Waker* a bit heavier," Asmussen says. "That was more about, 'We've got these heavy Japanese influences, the types of game we like, but we need to make it for a more accessible western market'. We didn't want it to be as punishing as *Dark Souls*, but also, we didn't want it to be as light and whimsical as *Zelda*." At one point the team had its enemy lock-on mapped to the left trigger, but moved it to a FromSoft-style click of the right stick when it decided to put Force powers on the triggers instead. "We've probably changed the controller layout 50 times. It needs to feel intuitive, every button has to have a purpose. Vince [Zampella, Respawn CEO] always says, 'It's just got to feel good.'"







While the game may play down the Jedi power fantasy when compared to, say, *Force Unleashed*, Cal is still capable of taking down an AT-ST in seconds. When the vehicle is destroyed, a dazed pilot spills out of the cockpit

STAR WARS IS NO ORDINARY PROJECT. RESPAWN ALSO HAD TO GET LUCASFILM ON SIDE

to be shopped around. "We started showing it to different publishers, and there was a lot of intrigue and enthusiasm around it," Asmussen says. "EA looked at it, and were thrilled." In what, depending on your viewpoint, either looks like fate or a complete waste of everyone's time, EA suggested Respawn use the concept as the basis for a Star Wars game.

"I think that kind of proved to them, 'Hey, this team's got what it takes'," Asmussen says. "Now I had a decision to make: do we go with this labour of love that we've been working on for a while, probably with a different publisher? Or do we take what is probably the last chance I'm going to have in my life to work on a Star Wars game? I remember coming home that night and telling my wife about it. I was like, 'This is a really crappy situation to be in'. She was like, 'What are you talking about [laughs]? It's a great situation to be in, you can't lose either way.'"

Zampella told Asmussen it was his call; Asmussen put it to the team, small as it was, and the response was unanimous: you just don't say no to Star Wars. Respawn's first ever action-adventure game would carry the name of the most famous pop-culture phenomenon on the planet.

"It's very much like starting a new studio," Asmussen says of the process of building his team. After all, this was a new genre for Respawn, and while other developers might have elected to send staff from the main *Titanfall* team on loan to help *Fallen Order* get off the ground, Asmussen had made clear to Zampella from the off that, if this was going to work, the two teams would be entirely separate: "that we're not sharing resources, based on, you know, shipping games and that type of thing. I'd had a bad experience with it in the past." Zampella agreed. Thanks to *Titanfall*'s success, the new team didn't need to expand at speed, and so Respawn was able to carefully handpick staff with the knowledge and experience



it needed for its first foray into thirdperson action games. Several members of Asmussen's old *God Of War* team made the switch from Sony to Respawn. Other early hires had worked on the *BioShock*, *Arkham* and *Metal Gear* series. When the time was right, interested members of the *Titanfall* team joined the cause too.

Thanks to the decision to make the game in Unreal Engine, which makes it easy to quickly implement and test ideas, and Respawn's light-touch way of working – "It's very production-light," de Heras says, "so there's a lot of ownership, you're trusted to bring your quality to the game" – the team hit the ground running. With a good idea, the required experience and a good engine, any normal project would be in perfect shape. Yet *Star Wars* is no ordinary project. Respawn also had to get Lucasfilm on side,





sending concept and assets over for approval from the sternest of eyes.

Asmussen admits it was a cagey process at first. "There was a lot of feeling each other out, understanding what they wanted and what their expectations were, and then adapting that to how we wanted to work. And I'll be honest, there were times where it was a bit painful – at the beginning especially, since it was kind of eye-opening, the extent of how much they wanted to review things. But what I learned was, that was more about us earning their respect. It's not so much about being a walking encyclopedia of Star Wars. It's about really learning what the spirit of the franchise is, and what *feels* right. What really belongs. And that took us a little bit of time. But we started to get some wins, and we started to earn their trust and their respect – to the point where now we've got a

really great relationship with them." The day before we speak, Lucasfilm visited Respawn. This late in the day, with the project pretty much content complete, there's a lot to go through, and Asmussen had set aside the whole day, from 10am to 7pm. "I was done by 3.30," he says. "You always know it's going right if you end early. That's been the case recently, and they're super-excited about it."

So are we. Our demo leans heavily on the patient, punishing combat system, but there are hints of the *Souls*-esque level design and *Metroid*-style gear-gating. After resting at a Meditation Rune (a bonfire by another name, that restocks your droid's healing stimpacks, respawns local enemies and lets you unlock new skills from a sprawling tree), we poke around the vicinity, and happen upon a chasm. Our demo handler ►

This lead-up to a big AT-AT set-piece sees Cal stealthily clambering up the side of one of the walkers before creeping along the top to the cockpit



Forest Whitaker stars as rebel leader Saw Gerrera, reprising his role from 2016 film *Rogue One*. The game is set shortly after the events of Episode III

Security guards hit multiple times in a row, and combo enders are often unblockable. Such attacks are signalled by the enemy's body glowing red – a more readable solution than *Sekiro's* kanji pop-ups

points out that it is, in fact, the bottom of an elevator shaft that you'll use later on. And throughout the game, both Cal and his droid, BD-1, will acquire new abilities that open up new areas on planets you've previously visited. Force push, for example, might collapse an obstruction to form a bridge. Obstacles that can't currently be bypassed are shown in red on the map, and once you've got the tool to progress, it will turn green.

That's a very instructive piece of design. For all that the development team have drawn from FromSoft and *Metroid* – and for all that the game's director cites an unfathomably difficult PS1 RPG as one of his all-time favourite games – this is still a Star Wars game. *Sekiro* became FromSoftware's fastest-selling game to date earlier this year, with two million copies shifted inside ten days. In Star Wars terms – even in EA terms – that would be classed as a failure. How do you walk the tightrope between tough, rewarding gameplay and a massmarket audience? How do you make a game in the FromSoft style and sell it to ten million people or more?

A bit of spectacle helps, and there's certainly plenty of that on show, most notably when BD-1 hacks an AT-AT and Cal takes the controls in a set-piece that wouldn't look out of place in a *Titanfall* game. But the real solution lies in things like showing exactly where your newly acquired tool can take you, rather than insisting you figure it out yourself. It's in the lavish post-parry finishing moves that subtly encourage you to engage with the tougher elements of the combat system. Above all it's in something that poses an answer to one of the most persistent debates surrounding FromSoft's games: the question of difficulty settings.

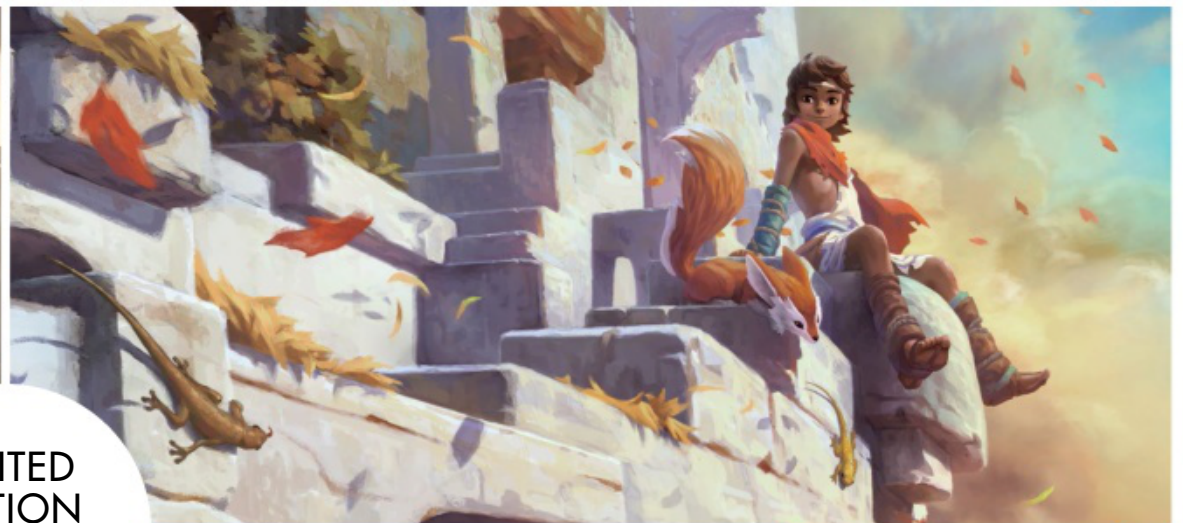
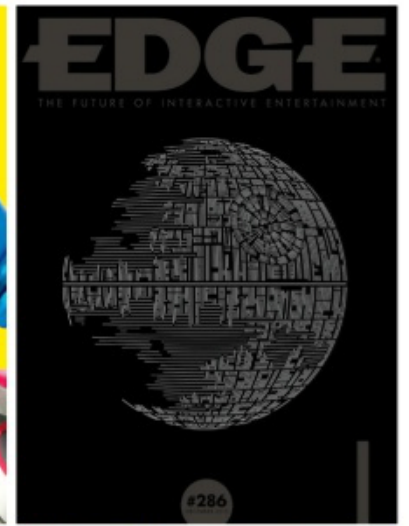
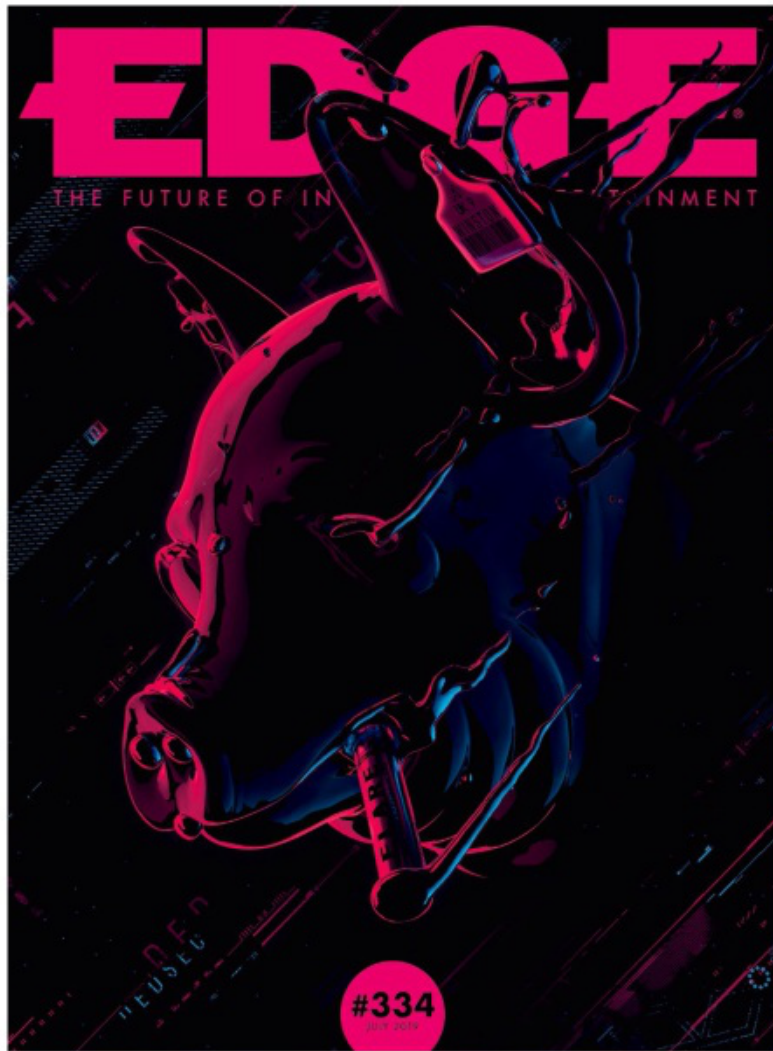
The yawning parry window in our demo is set to half a second – equivalent, currently, to the game's lowest difficulty level. That will change through the tiers, with the hardest difficulty reducing the window to one tenth of a second, comparable to *Devil May Cry 5's* Royal Guard counters, or a parry in a competitive fighting game. That's something de Heras knows all about – before he made games for a living, he played them, with a couple of top-three finishes at Evo in *Super Street Fighter II Turbo*. "The average reaction time in humans is 0.25 seconds, roughly. So we start with the science. Then we say, 'Well, we're getting older'," he laughs. "There's a broader audience we want to reach. So how do we appeal to hardcore players? Difficulty modes. We're going to tell you this – 'these are the core things that will

THIS LOOKS LIKE THE GAME THAT WILL JUSTIFY EA'S DECADE-LONG LICENSING DEAL

change' – when you select the difficulty. I don't like when games hide this stuff from you."

Whatever difficulty level you end up playing on, this already looks like the game that will finally justify EA's decade-long licensing deal that was signed in 2013. What looked on paper like a licence to print money has been more of a nightmare for the publisher: to date it has delivered only two *Star Wars Battlefront* games, the first criticised for its bare-bones offering and the second sparking a scandal around lootboxes and monetisation that has spread beyond the industry, in some cases into the offices of government legislators. At least three other games have been cancelled, and one of the three internal studios EA said had been tasked with making Star Wars games when the licensing deal was announced, San Francisco's Visceral Games, was closed when its project, codenamed Ragtag and helmed by *Uncharted* co-creator Amy Hennig, was canned.

Respawn appears, finally, to have cracked it, and it has done so in ways that may be uncomfortable for EA. It is a singleplayer-only game in a generation where the publisher has reaped such rewards from multiplayer live games. It has been made in Unreal at a time when EA has sought to have all its internal studios work in DICE's Frostbite engine. And it is a game that recasts the notion of a power fantasy as a matter of patience and precision, rather than a mere procession. The result is one of the best games of this year's E3, and certainly the most surprising. *Fallen Order* pays homage to some of the most difficult games around, yet will be sold to the masses. It's a cracking action game from a studio that has only ever made shooters. Above all, it's a Star Wars game we're actually excited about. They said singleplayer games were dead; that EA had squandered the biggest licensing deal on the planet. Here, appropriately enough, Respawn offers a perfectly timed riposte. ■



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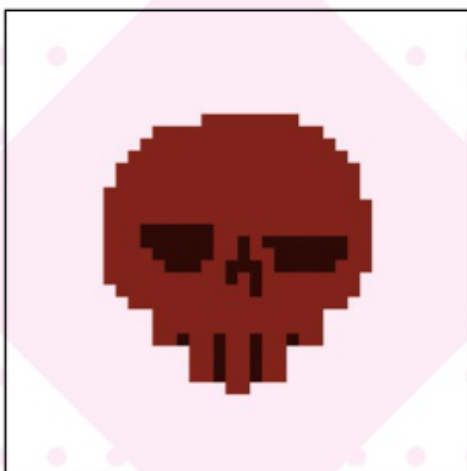
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T H E M A K I N G O F . . .



B A B A I S Y O U

How rebellious thinking informed the
cleverest puzzle game in years

By **CHRIS SCHILLING**

Format PC, Switch
Developer/publisher Hempuli Oy
Origin Finland
Release 2019

As a game that encourages you to break or rewrite its rules, it's fitting that the idea for *Baba Is You* should have come about under strictly controlled conditions. **Arvi 'Hempuli' Teikari** arrived at Nordic Game Jam in April 2017 intending to work on pre-existing projects. When the theme for the jam ("not there") was announced, Teikari wasn't particularly struck by it. But, partly inspired by his affinity for puzzle games such as *Snakebird* and *Stephen's Sausage Roll*, he suddenly had an epiphany: what if the word 'not' could somehow be used to defy the laws of nature? What if a block of ice could somehow survive contact with a pool of lava?

"The initial idea was kind of like this," he says. "Things have their own intrinsic rules, but you can disable those intrinsic rules by saying something is 'not' something. But then when I started prototyping, I realised it makes more sense if nothing actually has intrinsic rules – it's much cooler that way. So that's what I went with." From then on, the pieces fell into place. The theme had been announced on Friday evening, with Teikari's idea coming pretty soon afterwards. On Saturday night, he began prototyping the game. By midday on the Sunday, he'd built 14 stages. *Baba Is You* subsequently won the jam – and that version of the game is still freely available on itch.io.

Yet Teikari had already decided he definitely wasn't going to make a full game out of this idea. Even winning the competition didn't change his mind. He was conflicted about the end result, believing he'd struggle to expand upon it: "I felt that the game lent itself really well to a kind of sandbox-y, having-fun-with-words approach, where it was more about playing around and exploring the implications of the system." By contrast, he also believed it could be turned into a very difficult puzzle game with stricter solutions; but having struggled to figure out satisfying puzzles for the game-jam version, he was unsure if he could do the concept justice. "The uncertainty made me hesitant to commit to making a full game out of it," he admits. It was only the glowing feedback he received after his win that convinced him to stick at it. Returning to Helsinki, he continued with his day job, working with his colleagues at Nolla Games on physics-based Roguelike *Noita*. *Baba Is You* would now consume his evenings and weekends.



You quickly acclimatise to the surreal logic – as odd as the idea of pushing lava is, there are weirder concepts to come

Despite his taste for *Sokoban*-style puzzlers, Teikari felt that it would be better to build more puzzles around the idea of changing the rules rather than block pushing being the main focus. "Many *Sokoban* games have that limited space where you have to optimise your movement to get to the finishing line," he says. "I wanted to avoid that because I felt that it would increase

"I FELT THAT THE GAME LENT ITSELF REALLY WELL TO A KIND OF SANDBOX-Y, HAVING-FUN-WITH-WORDS APPROACH"

the difficulty without increasing what is most interesting about the game – even though the full game definitely has some levels that are much more about understanding what the rules mean, and then utilising those rules without actually changing them that much."

He was keen for his game to be a good teacher, and it is. *Baba Is You* doesn't rely on overt tutorials, but allows the player to learn concepts by solving puzzles and then elaborates on those ideas. Many early stages have an 'intended' solution, but also several alternative 'unintended' solutions that evoke the feeling of having circumvented the puzzle design – yet each of these has been deliberately left in by Teikari. "I use 'trick' to describe the idea that a level is trying to showcase," he says, "And so in those levels that introduce a new word, for example, I felt more comfortable leaving lots of

alternative solutions, because those mostly incorporated the actual trick, or something else that was equally interesting."

In many ways, he says, the more restrictive later levels were more challenging to design than the ones which allowed for multiple solutions. "The limitations I need to impose on the player become more complicated because the intended solution is more specific and has more moving parts. And in those more complicated levels, it turns out that most of the unintended or alternative solutions feel trivial. If a corner of a level has the rule 'wall is stop', and the player can just say, 'wall is you' and then beat the level just like that... I felt that it made sense to limit those alternative solutions in the more difficult levels, to lead the player to the more interesting insight instead of having them do the same alternative solution every time."

Teikari's desire to cater to different types of puzzle fan helped inform the structure of the game. *Baba Is You*'s map is split into several different zones, in which players can solve a handful of puzzles and then choose between moving onto somewhere new, potentially leaving clusters of more challenging puzzles behind, or finishing off the lot. After a while, you'll find it's almost impossible to get totally stuck, since it's rare not to have two or more areas open at once. That's partly thanks to a recommendation from one of Teikari's team of testers, game designer Alan Hazelden, to whom Teikari endearingly refers by his nom de plume Draknek, perhaps best known for *Cosmic Express* and *A Good Snowman Is Hard To Build*. "It was about allowing the player more freedom to experience the full content of the game without having to commit to learning and understanding the very advanced concepts of the final levels," he says. "I feel like there are a lot of players who possibly enjoy the concepts more than the puzzles, or at least the more difficult puzzles. They can have that experience of seeing new concepts without having to get frustrated with more difficult puzzles."

It also allowed him to create themed areas, with each showcasing a different mechanic – an approach Teikari says was inspired by Stephen Lavelle's *English Country Tune* and particularly Jonathan Blow's *The Witness*: "So you have these puzzle sequences, where you have a puzzle that introduces a new concept. And then you have maybe five puzzles after ►

that kind of build on that concept. So first the tutorial, and then increasingly difficult applications of that puzzle concept. That was there from a very early stage."

If an idea was good enough, whether it was in keeping with what Teikari calls the "sandbox-y spirit" of the original concept, or if it presented clever or amusing solutions – even if it didn't necessarily make for a particularly challenging puzzle – he would find room for it. It was a similar process for figuring out which words (and thus blocks) should be included in the game. "I'd rotate the concept in my head and consider what kind of interactions would feel interesting, or could be easily elaborated into puzzles," he says. In some cases, it was a simple matter of looking at elements from traditional *Sokoban*-style games, and twisting them: pushing a rock into water to make a crossing is a well-worn puzzle idea, and led Teikari to building levels around the word 'sink': "The words had to be either so interesting that I would have to have them in the game somehow, or so useful for designing puzzles that I couldn't not add them in."

In doing that, he came across a few ideas that didn't quite work. Two words in particular missed the cut. "The biggest example is possibly the word 'hold'," he says, "Where the idea was that if you say 'rock is hold', and Baba moves on top of the rock, or pushes something on top of the rock, that something would get stuck – as in the rock taking hold of the object – and it cannot be moved any longer." But having made three 'hold' levels, he not only discovered that they were samey, but that 'hold' was effectively little more than a fail state. "It essentially prevents you from doing something," he explains. "That works as an obstacle, sure. But as a central mechanic for a puzzle, it's maybe not the most exciting thing."

Another example was a word which would have introduced a time-travel element to the game. 'Back' would have allowed the affected object to move backwards through its own timeline, so anything that had previously happened to it would gradually be reversed. That eventually fell by the wayside during testing. "The amount of moves in a turn-based puzzle game is surprisingly high," Teikari says. "Say, if I push a rock, and then I change direction and push it again, I have to do at least two moves to get on the other side of the rock. And that adds up very quickly. I tried to design around it, but it

Q&A

Arvi Teikari
Director, *Baba Is You*



You mentioned Alan Hazelden – Draknek – helped. How did he get involved?

We've hung out in the same indie developer groups. I knew Draknek's PuzzleScript games from his Patreon, and *Cosmic Express* came out the same spring as I started working on *Baba Is You*. So when I had a version that was testable, it made sense to introduce it to other indie developer friends of mine. Draknek was part of that group – that's why he gets a special thanks in the credits. But there are many others – indie developers and otherwise – who have been helpful and kind throughout the process.

You said you were quietly confident in the game from a reasonably early stage. What were your main concerns before then?

Early on, I felt really uncertain about the visual design, because I felt like I needed to maximise my chances of the game doing well, maybe by doing it in Unity so that I could use 3D art – well, I'd ask someone else to do the art in case the game would otherwise go past people's radars. But especially after submitting to IGF, and winning the award there and showcasing it at a couple of events, I built up confidence that the idea was interesting enough that it would carry the presentation.

Do you feel any extra pressure from the level of acclaim it's received?

I'm more concerned that making something popular would negatively affect my friendships. Going to events and chatting with people and meeting indie developer friends is a very big part of a healthy social life. So not being able to do that for whatever reason would be bad. Though I don't think that's really going to happen – just being neurotic here in Helsinki [laughs]!

basically required a lot of waiting around for things to happen."

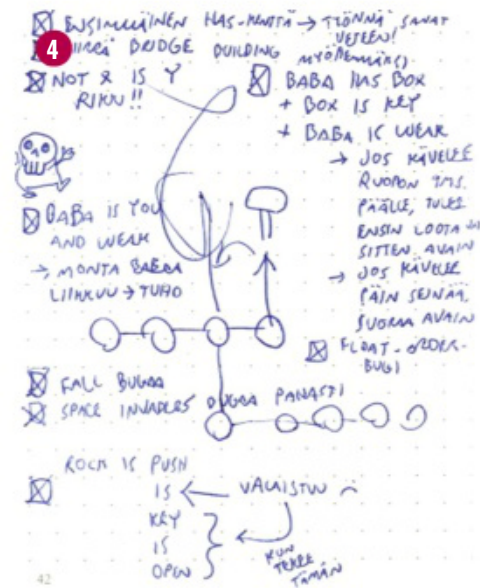
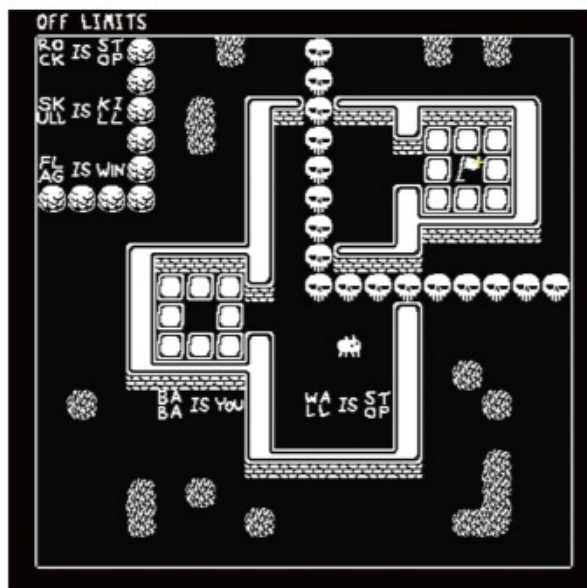
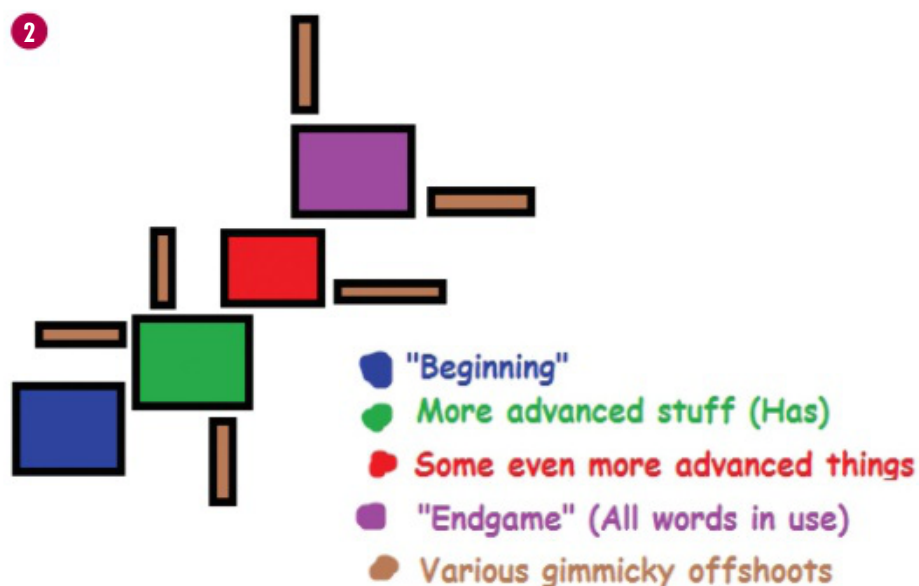
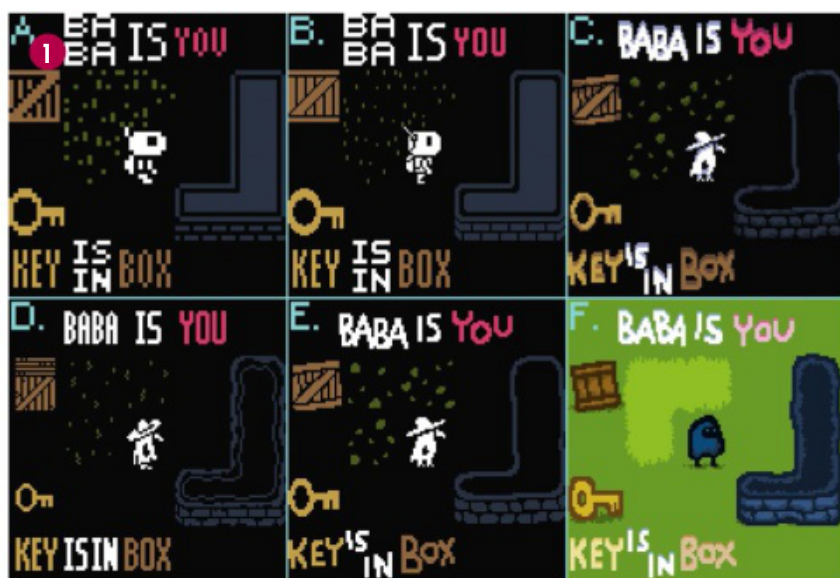
As a fan of time-travelling mechanics in games, Teikari isn't quite prepared to give up on the idea just yet. He's been dabbling with it since, in fact, with ample evidence of his experiments on the game's Twitter feed. It might never be introduced, he says. "But every time you remove a thing like that from the game, especially if it's something that feels really cool on paper, you eventually start wondering if you should put it back in."

That's not the only feature Teikari has been tinkering with. He plans to squash a few

lingering bugs, which he says are rarely encountered, but present nevertheless – partly as a result of cramming in one or two ideas at the 11th hour. Indeed, he admits that the game's final concept was added less than a week before the game was supposed to be done. "Maybe even a couple of days," he laughs. But he has grander plans beyond that. While figuring out a way to translate the actual rule text has proven beyond him, the user interface is being localised into other languages, while a proper level editor is also in the offing. PC users have already found Teikari's own editor within the game, and begun to mod it, he says. "But for an official level editor, we would want it to be on all the main platforms at least. So getting it to work so that you can make levels both on Switch and on PC is something that we are looking at."

Having all but abandoned all his other personal projects while developing *Baba Is You*, Teikari is planning to return to them; indeed, he says he's slowly getting back into the habit of doing weekly development streams. Still, he seems unable to resist coming back to *Baba*, admitting he's thinking about adding yet more features and stages. When he's not been working on the level editor, he's found himself idly thinking about the game: new words and level ideas simply keep coming to him. "I think I've added maybe five levels after release," he says. "Just because I got ideas and wanted to add them to the game." He concedes that perhaps making piecemeal updates isn't best practice, however. "So I'll probably start accumulating ideas before implementing them – and then eventually doing like a DLC or free update or some kind of official level pack that introduces new words."

While Teikari was confident in *Baba Is You* from an early stage, he's pleasantly surprised by how much attention it's had. But having planned to sustain himself on relatively niche games, he admits he's uncomfortable with the spotlight. "It's actually somewhat scary to suddenly be in a situation where I have this very successful game under my belt, because I don't really know what exactly that entails," he says. "What kind of extra requirement does it add for me as a business owner? How does it affect my future game design process?" You wouldn't bet against Teikari finding the answers, but he's certainly given himself a hard act to follow. ■



1 Teikari tried a number of different looks for Baba – indeed, in the jam build, Baba appears as a bipedal robot.

2 A simple map prototype. From an early stage, Teikari was keen to keep the novelty stages away from the rest.

3 An early design for a portion of the game map.

4 Some of Teikari's notes in Finnish, including a nod towards a *Space Invaders*-inspired stage teased on Twitter that never made it into the finished game. It still might, however – Teikari has said he's considering reworking it for release in a future level pack.

5 There are more than 1700 sprites in *Baba Is You*. Though the game's animation might seem rudimentary, Baba, Keke and Anni all have 60 individual sprites

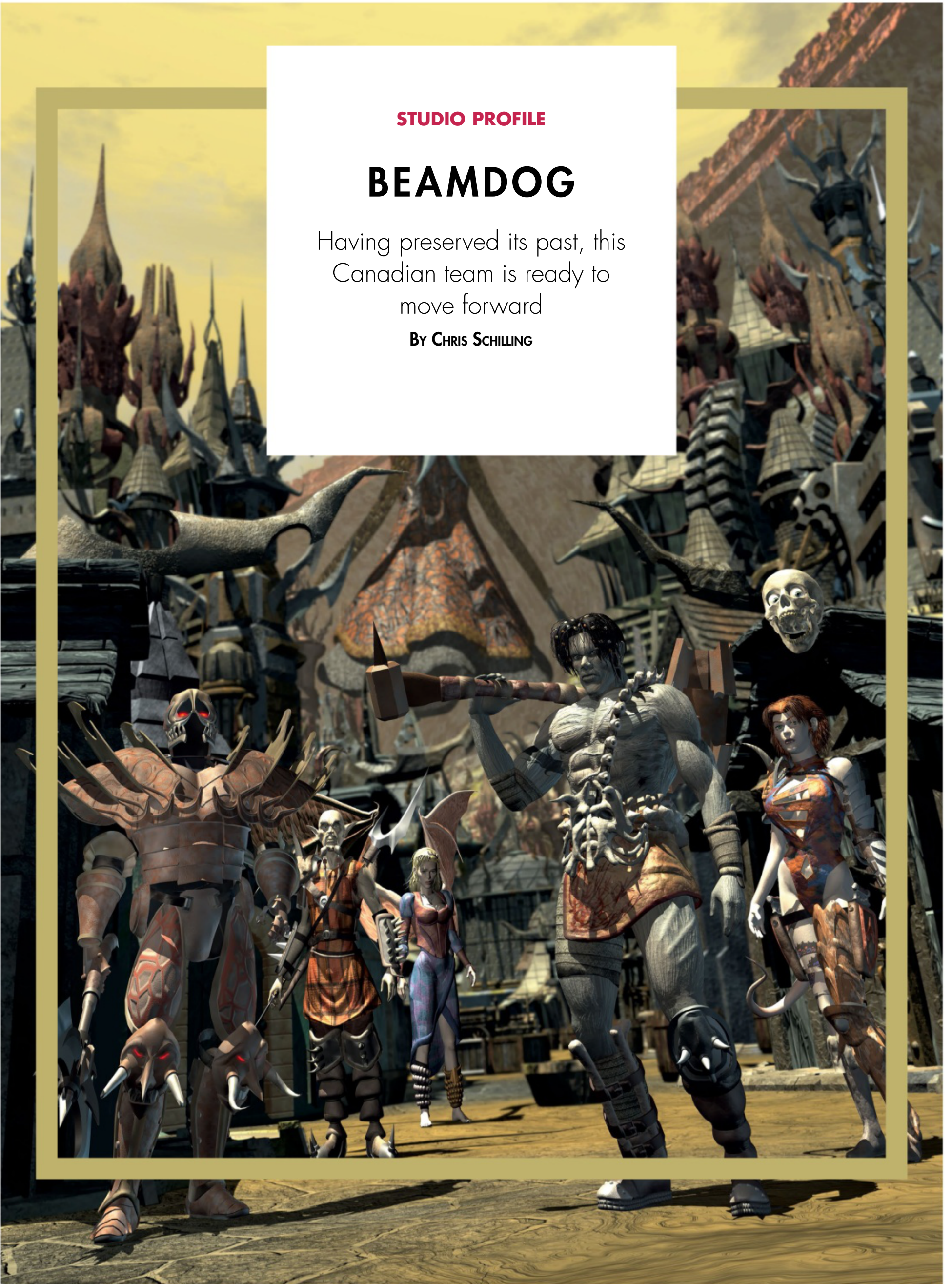


STUDIO PROFILE

BEAMDOG

Having preserved its past, this Canadian team is ready to move forward

By **CHRIS SCHILLING**



[beamdog]

Founded 2009

Employees 48

Key staff Trent Oster (co-founder, CEO),
Cameron Tofer (co-founder, COO)

URL www.beamdog.com

Selected softography *MDK2* Wii/HD, *Baldur's Gate II: Enhanced Edition*, *Baldur's Gate: Siege Of Dragonspear*, *Planescape: Torment – Enhanced Edition*

Current projects *Axis & Allies Online*

When Beamdog began updating classic RPG *Baldur's Gate* for PC and iOS, studio co-founder **Cameron Tofer** found himself on familiar ground. He had, after all, been one of the first employees through BioWare's doors after it was founded in 1995, working as a programmer on its debut game, *Shattered Steel*, and becoming part of the development team on the much-loved RPG soon after. But more than a decade on, as he began looking through the original code, he came across something that left him aghast. "I was like, 'The fuck were they thinking?'" Tofer tells us. He scrolled a little further, only to discover it was his name on the code. "I just thought, 'Oh boy,'" he laughs.

Released in 2012, the Enhanced Edition of *Baldur's Gate* was the third such update from the Canadian studio, which was originally established as a distributor. It was founded in 2009, when Trent Oster, one of BioWare's six co-founders, invited his former colleague to start afresh. The pair had been friends since Tofer was just 19. They'd always discussed working more closely together – at BioWare, the two were always on separate projects, Tofer explains – but plans had never really progressed beyond idle chat. But shortly after BioWare was acquired by Electronic Arts, Oster reckoned it was finally time. "When he was finished there, he called me up and said, 'Hey, let's do that thing we've been always talking about,'" Tofer recalls. There was no hesitation in his response.

Yet it seems the two initially disagreed on the direction of their new project. "He said, 'Let's make some games!' and I was like, 'Let's not!'" Tofer laughs. After some discussion, they thrashed out a plan. With so many smaller studios starting up at the time, Beamdog knew it would face problems following a similar path in an increasingly crowded market. And so it set up to sell games rather than make them. Eventually, as the studio was developing its store, the idea of bringing some of its older games to a new audience was suggested – albeit more as an opportunity for the store to gain traction. This was, of course, a time before seemingly every other publisher had started remastering old favourites. "Today, it's a bit different, but in 2009 it felt like those games were being forgotten," Tofer says. "And it was getting harder and harder to play them, so it all just made sense."

To which end, Beamdog established a development team by the name of Overhaul Games – a perfectly logical name given the job



Beamdog has over 40 in-house staff now, though it has required external help with QA, localisation and more

they had in front of them. But that resulted in what Tofer calls an "internal branding war" – at one stage, the entire company was going to be rebranded, but by that time Beamdog's store had already gained sufficient traction that abandoning its original moniker didn't seem wise. "So we stuck with it," Tofer says. "There's a little bit of confusion there, but there isn't a lot that really matters from a consumer point of view. It was just us kind of bouncing around finding our

"IT WAS VERY SIMPLE – ONCE WE DID ONE, WE JUST KEPT GOING, AND EVERYBODY INVOLVED WAS HAPPY"

footing in those early days."

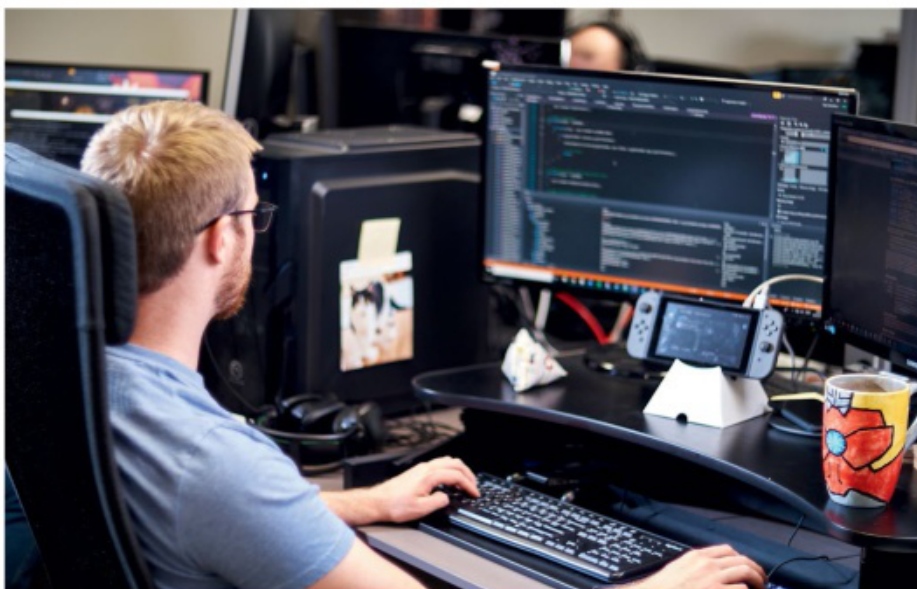
With only a handful of staff – Tofer estimates there were six members on the team at the time – the decision to revisit those old titles was a matter of logistics as much as anything else. After all, Tofer and Oster knew these games very well, which made them the perfect candidates for hi-def updates. Before *Baldur's Gate* came a game with which Tofer was even more familiar: he was not only lead designer on sci-fi shooter *MDK2*, but programmer and co-producer, too. "It was pretty easy to contact Interplay, put together the deal and turn it around," he says. The original game was ported to Wii in May 2011, while PC owners got a more comprehensive audiovisual remaster (with better textures, lighting and music) five months later, as a Beamdog store exclusive. Having originally decided not to make games, Tofer and Oster now wanted more, and the next game on the slate was an obvious choice. "It was like, 'Okay, we really need to do *Baldur's Gate*, because that's the one everybody loves,'" he says.

But it was to prove more complicated, even after its release. Lengthy negotiations between Beamdog, Atari and Wizards Of The Coast delayed the project, while Beamdog had to license the game's Infinity engine from BioWare. Then a rival distributor became entangled: "GOG began negotiating for the rights around the same time," Tofer notes. Atari's involvement, meanwhile, eventually resulted in the game being pulled from both the App Store and Beamdog's own online store for two months. "Looking back, we knew what we were getting into," Tofer says. "But once we were given the green flag, we just started tearing into it."

Having been put on hold due to the wrangles with Atari, the much-loved *Baldur's Gate II* got its own Enhanced Edition just a few short months after the dispute had finally been resolved. A year later, *Icewind Dale: Enhanced Edition* made its debut. "They used the same base technology, and had the same rights holders," Tofer says. "So it was very simple – once we did one, we just kept going, and everybody involved with the deal was pretty happy."

By the time it came to remastering Black Isle Studios' cult classic *Planescape: Torment*, Beamdog had really begun to hit its stride as a studio. Yet even with Tofer's experience as a programmer, and a larger in-house team, these conversions had all proved more time-consuming than the two founders had anticipated. The unwieldy original code partly accounted for that, not to mention the fact that these games were, in many respects, ahead of their time. "I can look back with hindsight and say, 'Oh, yeah, the original team could have done this so much

STUDIO PROFILE



Tofer says it's important for his teams to feel really comfortable with a game they're adapting in order to maintain its essence. "There is an element of reinterpretation," he tells us. "You can't just move these things across – that's not going to fly"

better," he says. "But considering the experience of the team and the tools at the time... wow. It's actually admirable. And in the context of today, it is a very technical challenge. Because we're dealing with C++, we're dealing with incredibly large codebases. And these games have so many details and moving parts."

He concedes that preservation was never really foremost in his thoughts when Beamdog's founders began revisiting their past work, but over time Tofer has come to see how valuable the studio's mission has become. "It didn't really occur to us until the nth conversation where people come up to you and say, 'Man, that game really made a difference to me', that you realise they really struck a chord with people, and that people being able to play them now is important." And that's regardless of format: now Beamdog has teamed up with Skybound to bring the Enhanced Editions of *Baldur's Gate*, its sequel, *Icewind Dale* and *Planescape: Torment* to consoles, including Switch, this September.

But as Tofer admits, there are only so many classic games with which he and his colleagues are intimately familiar – and, by extension, that Beamdog is well-positioned to remake. And so, alongside the work on the console ports, it's decided to broaden its horizons. Starting late in 2018, Tofer and Oster made a conscious choice to expand, moving offices and staffing up for a push towards being a multi-project studio. "We've got tons of great people developing and tuning all these products for all those platforms," Tofer says. "It's an incredible undertaking." All of which means Tofer has since been able to take a step back from digging around in his own code ("I just do the biz-dev stuff," he says modestly) and is happy for younger project leads to take over.

In the meantime, Beamdog has another team working on *Axis & Allies Online*, an adaptation of the WWII tabletop strategy game. It's not

actually the studio's first original creation: that honour goes to *Baldur's Gate: Siege Of Dragonspear*, an expansion set between the events of the two games, which received a mixed response upon its release in 2016. That was a sobering reminder that, while the studio likes to maintain an open line of communication with its community, it's possible for feedback to go too far. "I respect the fact that the internet is a great place to go and speak your mind. But when it's your livelihood... thinking like a developer, it can be an emotional rollercoaster, if you're watching everything that's said about your products," he says. "And as an employer, it's hard for me to justify really exposing people to that. It's tough."

"WE'VE GOT TONS OF GREAT PEOPLE DEVELOPING AND TUNING ALL THESE PRODUCTS FOR ALL THOSE PLATFORMS"

For all that, Beamdog is still keen to solicit feedback from *Axis & Allies* fans – which is partly why the game will initially launch in Early Access. With *Baldur's Gate* and the other Enhanced Editions, it already had a ready-made fanbase to advise it; the studio doesn't quite have the same luxury with its latest, though Tofer's hoping members of the tabletop community will help shape the game's direction. "There's a ton of *Axis & Allies* fans, and we want to hear their voice. And so it's important to give them that forum and let them be heard."

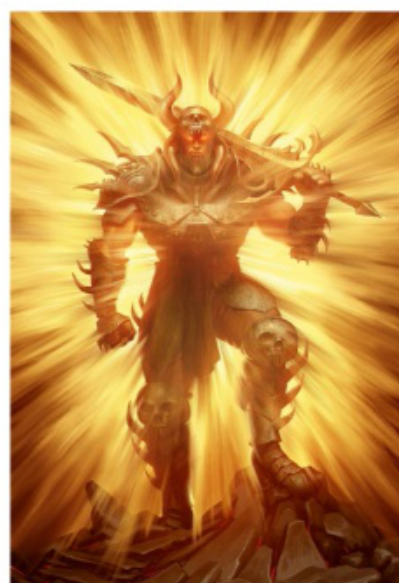
As for the game, it's a creative milestone, but still very much in this Dungeons & Dragons-loving developer's wheelhouse. "We put it under the same childhood-fantasy banner," Tofer says. "*Axis & Allies* was one of those games that sat next to

D&D and the other cool, early '90s stuff that really got us going." In another sense, it's an extension of what Beamdog has been doing since day one: making it more convenient for a wider playerbase to experience these games. "It's the same with *Baldur's Gate*," Tofer adds. "Before the Enhanced Editions, it was a bit of a commitment if you wanted a game."

Between 15 and 20 people are currently working on *Axis & Allies Online*, and that doesn't represent Beamdog's creative efforts in totality – there are, Tofer says, other projects that the studio isn't ready to talk about just yet. So will it continue playing to its strengths within this niche, or look to diversify even more? A little bit of both, he says,

noting that the Enhanced Editions, even on existing formats, remain an ongoing concern. "We continue to update the games and patch them and make sure they continue to work. The 32-bit to 64-bit transitions, for example – that's one of those things where it doesn't really matter to customers too much, because it shouldn't. But for us it's a technical challenge."

Still, the Enhanced Editions are an obvious point of pride for Tofer and his team, as the studio prepares to close one chapter and begin another. "It represents that 'Holy cow, we did it' moment," he says. "You can play *Baldur's Gate* in so many different places, on so many different devices... it really feels like we've accomplished a goal. But as a studio, we're beginning to make a change. We're moving into new areas, and we're really looking forward to that." ■



- 1 *Icewind Dale: Enhanced Edition* came with its two expansions.
- 2 *Neverwinter Nights: Enhanced Edition* will arrive on Switch, PS4 and Xbox One this December.
- 3 Unusually, Beamdog's remake of *Planescape: Torment* was directed by an external staffer.
- 4 The iPad's success convinced Tofer the App Store should be a priority: "PC was first," he says, "but getting it on iOS was definitely at the top of our minds"



PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Virtua Racing Switch

One member of the **Edge** crew need only hear the time-bonus jingles from Yu Suzuki's arcade masterpiece to be transplanted back to the early '90s, and a certain laser-quest centre in the far north of England. With a higher framerate, resolution and draw distance, the Switch version is the best *Virtua Racing* has ever been. We do, we must admit, rather miss the pop-in.

Hypnospace Outlaw PC

We'd almost forgotten about Piczo entirely. This fictional 'sleeptime social network' from the Y2K era, specifically the Teentopia zone, brings memories of the blog site flooding back: the DIY webpages with animated clip art, terrible fonts, and the impending social suicide should we forget to sign our bully's digital guestbook. Well, look at us now: a highly lucrative career in game journalism, a few thousand Twitter followers and a crippling need for validation. Shit, wait.

Flipflop Solitaire iOS

With the inflight WiFi on our E3 flight apparently only a myth, and the Switch in our bag feeling too much like a commitment after a punishing week in Los Angeles, we delve back into Zach Gage's wonderful riff on Solitaire. As is often the case with Gage's reimaginings, the differences are few but vital; being able to stack cards in both ascending or descending order means almost every possible deal can be solved. Weeks after touchdown, we're still at it.

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Explore the iPad
edition of **Edge** for
extra Play content



Source engine

Nostalgia is a powerful marketing tool, especially in games – but it's important to tread carefully when you're digging up the past. Some things, after all, are better left in the ground. It's a point proven ably this month by *The Sinking City* (p114). Frogwares' open-world detective game draws heavily on the works of HP Lovecraft, an author whose impact on horror has been legendary, but who held certain views that, by modern standards, are similarly horrifying. Frogwares gets out in front of the problem to an extent, opening the game with a warning about the prejudices of Lovecraft's era. Perhaps that doesn't go far enough – this was Lovecraft's problem, and it cannot be blamed solely on the world around him at the time. But going for it warts and all is probably a better decision than whitewashing away all the unseemly stuff.

Looking backwards is a recurring theme this issue, albeit not always on such a controversial scale. Nonetheless, we expect Brace Yourself Games may have ruffled feathers at Nintendo when it first suggested making *Zelda*, as well as Link, playable in *Cadence Of Hyrule* (p112). Yes, this is a spin-off, transplanting *Zelda* history into the *Crypt Of The Necrodancer* template. Yet it is also a work of nostalgia, the top-down camera recalling Link's 2D outings, the soundtrack a series of chiptune remixes of *Zelda* tunes. It takes a sensitive hand to make this stuff work.

Or does it? The counterpoint to all this is *Super Mario Maker 2* (p104), in which Nintendo hands you the keys to the most prized IP in videogames and tells you to do with it as you wish. There's help if you want it – through the gentle suggestion of its Story mode, or the marvellous tutorial series – but it never insists on telling you how things ought to be done. The result is a very different kind of classic.



Super Mario Maker 2

Compromise, *Super Mario Maker 2* teaches us, can sometimes be a good thing. Fairness is the hallmark of good level design – as obvious as it sounds, it’s important to recognise that players are human, and that giving them a chance to recover from their mistakes is a worthwhile concession to make. Likewise, there’s value in sometimes pulling back from your grand vision: creation goes hand-in-hand with curation, and stuffing all your ideas in one level will rarely make it better. Whether this explains Nintendo’s approach here is a trickier question to answer. Because if you’ve played the Wii U original, you’ll be acutely aware that bringing *Super Mario Maker* to Switch has resulted in a few trade-offs.

Some of these are understandable. The original, after all, was built specifically for Wii U; *Super Mario Maker 2* handily illustrates the kind of problems that arise when you have to follow a game that’s been tailored towards an idiosyncratic piece of hardware. This is a rare example of a Nintendo sequel – *Super Mario 64 DS* is another that comes to mind – that’s been brought to a console for which it’s not wholly suited. On a fundamental level, fingers simply can’t hope to match the fidelity of a stylus: the inevitable compromise in switching from a resistive touchscreen to a capacitive display. Sure, you’ll acclimatise – at least when creating in handheld mode, since the pointer controls on the TV screen are even less ideal – but you can no longer put together a course with the same precision and speed. It might be enough to put a few budding creators off – one of the main benefits of the original was being able to get your ideas down quickly, and anything that slows down that process inevitably feels like a step back.

With some of the other omissions, you’ll wonder whether Nintendo is keen to keep the original game relevant rather than trying to supersede it entirely. *Super Mario Maker* was, after all, something of a Hail Mary for Wii U, a big deal for which Nintendo brought out its big guns, with Shigeru Miyamoto and Takashi Tezuka heavily involved in its development. Director Yosuke Oshino is still at the helm, but this doesn’t seem to have had quite as much love lavished upon it. It’s noticeably less playful, for starters – the *Mario Paint* fly-swatter minigame won’t be missed by many, but it’s one of a handful of sillier touches that add up to a conspicuous gap that hasn’t really been filled.

You could, if pushed, make an argument for the original’s Amiibo functionality making the *Super Mario Bros* theme a little too appealing at the cost of the other level types. Even so, its absence here is a surprise. There’s no Tall Mario, and you can no longer shake objects and enemies to transform them. Even the title screen Easter eggs are gone. There’s plenty of new stuff, of course, and the vast majority of new additions are more than worthwhile. But those weird little curlicues

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD)
Format Switch
Release Out now

A rare example of a Nintendo sequel that’s been brought to a console for which it’s not wholly suited

are missed. You sense, at times, that this is a sequel Nintendo had to make, rather than one it wanted to.

Still, it would be unfair to suggest it’s simply going through the motions. Miiverse may be no more, but Nintendo makes a decent fist of compensating for its absence, with much of the service’s functionality incorporated into the online game. Comments on – and in – stages are present and correct, and you can choose from a clutch of preset pictorials, from an encouraging ‘good stuff’ accompanied by Toad and Toadette fist-bumping to passive-aggressive complaints (Mario clutching his backside next to a Spiny’s spike, while yelping “seriously?!”) Within Course World, you can add a brief description beneath your level title – which can make all the difference, particularly when setting conditional goals – while various tags (Short and sweet; puzzle-solving; speedrun) let you fine-tune your searches, and make sure your own courses show up in the right places.

If cooperative creation is a recipe for frustration – far better to let one player do the steering while a partner makes suggestions rather than fight over menus – *Super Mario Maker 2* thrives in its online multiplayer. Even the most rudimentary levels are enlivened when turned into a race with three others to the goal pole; it might take longer to find a half-decent course for cooperative play, but clumsily coordinating with strangers produces enough moments of hilarity to make up for the frustration. Currently, you can’t play online with friends, though Nintendo’s muttering about unfair advantages affecting online rankings doesn’t hold water when it could just withhold course records from organised teams. Besides, displaying the world record time for every course feels unnecessary – it’s hardly suited to those designed to be slower-paced, and there’s a risk it might discourage more puzzle-led designs in favour of speedruns. Whether you’re focusing on play or creation, there are unlockable outfits and accessories for your Mii avatar. Think of them as a bonus rather than an incentive and they’re less underwhelming.

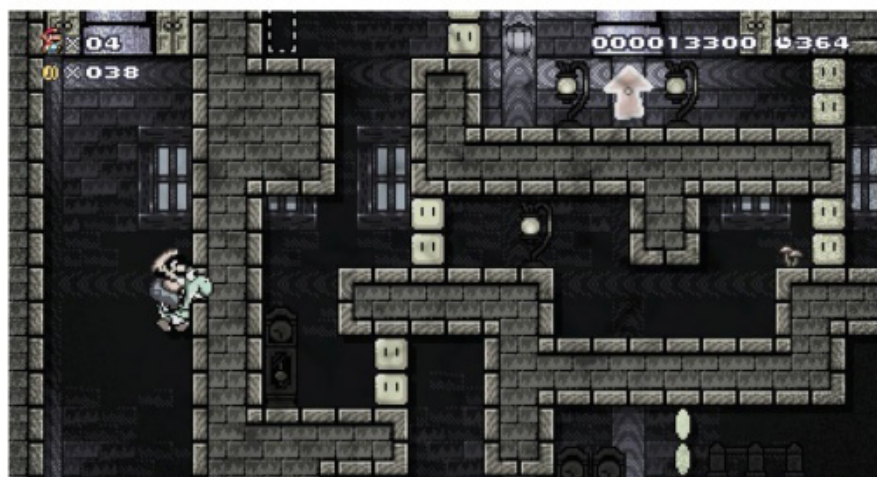
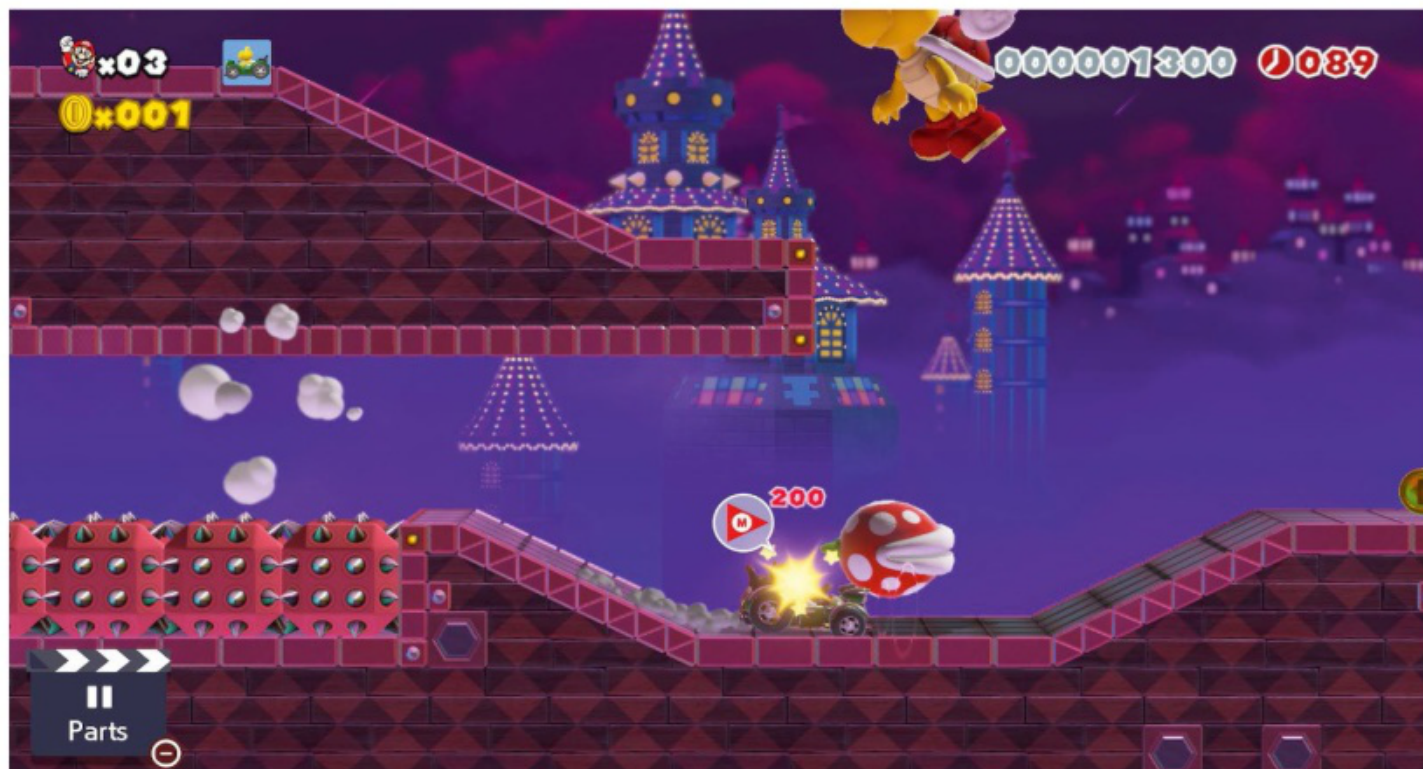
Though a host of new course elements increases the time spent searching for that one item, gizmo or enemy that will really tie your level together, having more tools to play with is always welcome. Not least the new sky, snow, desert and forest level themes, whose inclusion has led to Koji Kondo delivering some delightful remixes of his classic tunes. The appearance of *Super Mario Bros 3*’s Angry Sun, meanwhile, has encouraged Nintendo to create a counterpart in a smiling moon, which proves one of the single most transformative features of the whole game. It causes different effects depending on the theme, turning stages upside down or changing water into deadly poison. In ghost houses it limits your vision to a small circle around Mario, which ►



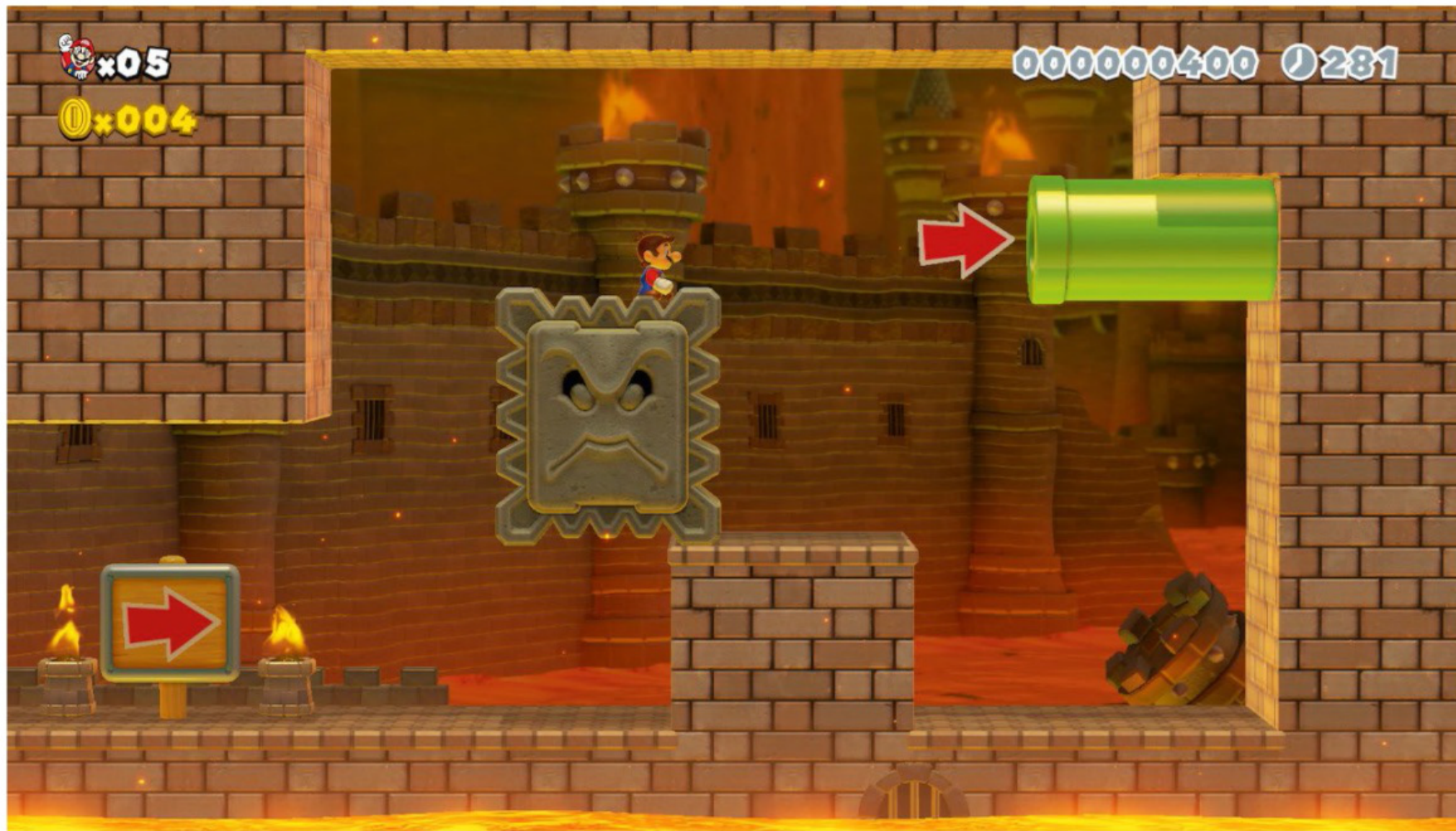
RIGHT The Koopa Troopa Car replaces the Koopa Clown Car in the 3D World theme. Using ramps, slopes, conveyors and trampolines, you can build a half-decent vehicle stage fairly easily – and Nintendo has included the SNES Mario Circuit theme for such an eventuality.

MAIN *Super Mario World* has the most distinctive style, and with the new level themes you can build the direct sequel we never got. *Yoshi's Island Maker* next please, Nintendo.

BOTTOM Though you can build with a partner, you can't create levels that *require* two players to complete. Building side routes to reward team play, however? Fine



ABOVE One minor annoyance: failing twice on a level prompts Luigi to offer his assistance before the third attempt. There's seemingly no way to turn this off, though we suppose it's another incentive to not die



lets you build a stage around light sources. If you're finding a castle course with rising lava too tricky, once the sky is filled with stars you can swim through it. And for that extra special touch, why not set a trigger point to play the Gusty Garden Galaxy theme?

The new *Super Mario 3D World* theme, meanwhile, comes with a wealth of unique features at a cost to consistency. Hived off under 'extra game styles', it's entirely incompatible with the other four, meaning that any progress will be deleted should you switch to or from it while designing a course. That Nintendo has left a tantalising empty space alongside it suggests another style will be added at a later date (*SMB2* seems the most likely candidate, given that it's also different enough to make it incompatible with the other side-scrollers). And though some will carp about not being able to throw, say, a Charvaargh into *Super Mario Bros*, the distinction is necessary, not only to help distinguish the styles but to accommodate 3D Mario's more expansive moveset, including his long jump. For sheer novelty alone, it's likely to be the first port of call for those who exhausted the original's toolset. It's not hard to see how Skipsqueaks that leap when Mario does could present a platforming challenge, while Blinking Blocks (formerly known as Beep Blocks or Beat Blocks) add a rhythmic element to course design. Combine downslopes with Cat Mario's diving ability and transparent pipes, and you could build a *Mario* stage that feels more like *Sonic*.

For those who'd rather play than create, however, the Story Mode is naturally the main draw. It's constructed around, well, construction: Peach's Castle needs rebuilding, from its foundations to its towers. You use coins from clearing stages – which are added to those you pick up, a smart incentive not to just race to the



KING OF THE CASTLE

It's worth playing through Story mode to the end – and thoroughly exploring the area around the castle, for that matter – to unlock a pair of outfits and abilities. One's old, one's new: there's a nostalgic surprise that might hint at an alternative option for that 'extra styles' box, and an ability with fascinating potential for more puzzle-led courses. You needn't fret too much about having to complete the toughest courses. While you won't get the fixed reward for completing a stage on subsequent tries, any coins you grab within will still be added to your total. And if you're still struggling, you can call upon Luigi for a power-up to help flatten out some of the steeper challenges.

It says something for how deeply ingrained the behaviours of *Mario* enemies have become that the sight of a Thwomp moving sideways feels like a radical shift. They're a handy way to add danger to vertical stages

flagpole – to unlock new projects, then complete a given number of stages to finish the job. Though arguably not as purely enjoyable as the 100-level campaign from the 3DS version, it's a better teacher, with a stronger focus on individual themes and hooks, alongside creative riffs on new features – one inspired stage turns the swinging claw into a UFO Catcher puzzle. Some are relatively short, and one or two even feel incomplete, as if nudging you to do better. It's hard not to think that's deliberate, not least when the pick of the levels are right up there with the best of 2D *Mario*.

Here, you're also introduced to clear conditions, which proves something of a game-changer, letting you set specific objectives – think *NSMBU*'s challenge mode – that can transform a straightforward level into a more demanding challenge. These range from simple tasks, such as pulling off a handstand at the top of every tree, to more exacting tests, where you'll need to collect every coin. You might be asked to reach the end of the stage carrying a heavy rock, or get to the goal pole without touching the ground once you've left it.

It's still the most accessible creative tool around, and this time it has even more wisdom to impart about good level design. Nevertheless, much as it's a joy to tinker with, this hasn't supplanted the Wii U version – the definitive *Super Mario Maker* lies somewhere between the immediacy and playfulness of the original, and the features of its sequel. Hamstrung slightly by its hardware, this is a wonderful and educational creative tool; better, if less lovable, than its predecessor. A compromise, then, but a damn-near essential one.

Post Script

Why Super Mario Maker 2's dojo is a best-in-class tutorial for budding creators

Tucked away behind an unassuming icon depicting a pigeon with Mario's 'M' on his breast, you'll find a series of tutorials that might be *Super Mario Maker 2*'s secret best feature. Yamamura's Dojo features 45 lessons split equally into Beginner, Intermediate and Advanced categories. These cover everything from the basics of inspiration, testing and using individual parts, to exploration of concepts such as pacing and direction that might be trickier for beginners to grasp. They may even teach seasoned designers a thing or two.

It's a tutorial that also breaks an unwritten rule, in that it doesn't directly involve the player at all. Rather than have you place platforms and then patronisingly pat you on the back for following simple instructions, these lessons take the form of short clips, illustrated by exchanges between Yamamura (whose every line is a series of subtitled coos) and sparky human sidekick Nina that you can tap through at your own pace.

While certain creative tools have a tendency to overwhelm you with a blank canvas, one of the running themes of the dojo is a focus on limits over freedom, with Yamamura encouraging you to impose restrictions upon yourself. It reminds you that good design often involves subtraction, and espouses the value of repetition and gentle remixing. Though it's never directly referenced, there are clear nods to *Super Mario 3D World* director Koichi Hayashida's philosophy of kishotenketsu, based on four-panel comic strips, whereby an idea is introduced in a safe space, then developed, twisted and concluded.

It helps that Yamamura is no smug know-it-all. Rather than simply highlighting best practices and expecting you to grasp them, he offers bad examples and potential fixes, showing how the process of improving your level design is iterative. These lessons throw up familiar scenarios with which anyone who's tried to make a course will identify with. In one, it cleverly addresses feature creep, as Yamamura admits how tempting it is to keep adding features. The subject is broached again in one of the Advanced lessons, in which Nina highlights the struggle to bring a level to a satisfying close. Here, Yamamura suggests imposing boundaries on yourself to encourage creative solutions. And those spare ideas? Well, you can always save them for another stage. Game developers are always saying the most important piece of advice is 'ship your game'; this is *Super Mario Maker 2*'s way of delivering a similar message to its players.

And it's not just the acknowledgement of their own design shortcomings that make these two tutors such an appealing pair. Running jokes and wry one-liners prevent it from ever lapsing into a dry instructional.

These lessons throw up familiar scenarios which anyone who's tried to make a course will identify with

The two argue over terminology – Nina says 'level', while Yamamura prefers 'course', while we learn that it's "unsanitary" to leave power-ups on the ground, and that a creator who puts coins out of reach has "no moral compass". It's refreshingly honest at times, too: Nina concedes that the sheer range of objects in the Gizmos menu is a little overwhelming.

You'd never say the same for the dojo, which splits its lessons into manageable chunks. This approach also allows Nintendo to return to previous subjects later on for elaboration. It digs into player psychology on a few occasions, without getting too technical about it. We learn how a trail of coins can tempt us to take more dangerous routes, even when there's no wider incentive – such as, say, a clear condition – to collect them. And we're shown how you can modify a split path to make one route more alluring, arousing your players' curiosity by narrowing one to make it look like a secret passage.

The importance of fairness, meanwhile, is illustrated by a section that is entirely unfair, showing how frustrating it is when enemies appear without warning. It goes on to demonstrate how you don't need to telegraph the arrival of an enemy, but a subtle warning is welcome – such as a Thwomp-sized gap at the top of the screen. As a way of highlighting that there can be multiple solutions to the same problem, it introduces an alternative: placing hard blocks in a larger Thwomp's path to arrest its fall, so even if its arrival comes as a shock, you've got just enough time to escape.

So while the practical applications of new features in Story Mode are more likely to inspire level ideas, it's these lessons that will allow you to refine your craft. And it's here you're introduced to subtler tricks that you won't necessarily spot while playing – like, for example, using objects to add atmosphere. Connecting rails to thin platforms makes them look flimsier, even if they're sturdy enough to hold Mario's weight. And a semi-solid platform expanded to the uppermost platform can make the area below feel enclosed, like a cave; change the platforms inside to bridges and then, as Nina points out, it looks more man-made than organic.

With luck, it might just result in a new wave of curator-creators making more thoughtful levels than Wii U players ever did – and on the evidence so far, those with review copies have taken some of these lessons on board. Sure, we might end up with another load of auto-scrolling courses stuffed with as many enemies and hazards as the game will allow; a series of masocore levels based in slippery-slidey ice worlds; or stages that rely on a nostalgic burst of the Delfino Plaza theme to paper over the cracks in their design foundations. But if so, it won't be for a lack of effort on Nintendo's part to make us all better Mario Makers. ■



My Friend Pedro

Reality can be a downer. For instance: would you rather admit to your deeply ingrained emotional issues, and a weakness for bloodshed that leads to the slaughter of hundreds of security guards just doing their jobs? Or would you prefer to blame your problems on a talking banana, who gives you the power to control time and hypes up your every kill with exclamations of “lovely” and “snazzy”? No wonder *My Friend Pedro*’s masked protagonist spends so much time ignoring the real world: there are no high scores in therapy.

The trouble is that you can only get away with doing so for so long before it all catches up with you. So it proves here. This wickedly silly side-scrolling shooter has one of the best immediate hooks we’ve seen in a while – acrobatic gun-fu shooting, augmented by a Matrix-style slow-motion ability and some brilliantly gory gimmicks – but struggles to sustain the initial thrill, tripped up by the nitty-gritty details of its design.

For a good while, however, it certainly seems as though we’re the ones slipping. In its first few levels, *My Friend Pedro* walks the line between accommodating and challenging admirably. The tutorial’s explanations of everything you can take advantage of in combat – the slow-mo ability that can be toggled on and off, a bullet-defying spin, kicking objects at enemies and splitting your aim to fire at two goons at once – are basic, but enough to set you going. Little breadcrumb trails are laid out: a knife stuck into the ground in front of the door you’re just about to open onto a roomful of unsuspecting guards; a pan on the floor just below three more. We can almost see solo developer Victor Ågren wiggling his eyebrows at us.

Our friend Pedro is also babbling away quite animatedly. So we oblige, bursting into the room and roundhousing the suggestively placed knife into the nearest face before frontflipping into the midst of the remaining guards, firing from both guns while pirouetting to dodge their shots. Next, up goes the pan, its trajectory aimed with the right stick before we apply foot to fryer – and afterwards, the shots from our Uzi, which ping off the pan in mid-air before embedding themselves in our targets. A generous application of our time-slowness ability (activated with a stick-click) gives us some much-needed breathing room to aim properly, and improvise effectively to chain as much chaos together as possible. Ågren has minimised potential frustration with bullet time, offering players a generous meter that refills very quickly when not in use.

The result is that – when we’re not being stupid or clumsy – we can pull off ridiculous, yelp-inducing stunts. Stunts such as swinging upside-down through a plate glass window before shotgunning one guy into bits while back-somersaulting off his body onto a skateboard – which we then kickflip into someone else’s head. Ammo is just scarce enough to force us to

Developer DeadToast Entertainment
Publisher Devolver Digital
Format PC, Switch (tested)
Release Out now

We oblige,
bursting into
the room and
roundhousing
the suggestively
placed knife into
the nearest face



WASTED CLIP

When a moment of divine carnage comes together, all you want to do is show it off. We were looking forward to an in-game GIF generator, then, which sensibly formed part of *My Friend Pedro*’s marketing push and was included in demo builds. Sadly, it seems the feature hasn’t made it into the Switch version of the game: *Pedro* does produce a short clip from your run at the end of each level (although in our experience it’s often far from our best effort) but the handy button beside it to save it or share it to Twitter has gone. Of course, it’s still fairly easy to do so via Switch’s in-built video-sharing capabilities – but if you are looking for the quickest and most convenient way to brag about your shooting skills, stick to the PC version.

switch between weapon types and use our (always dangerous, often explosive) surroundings to squeeze the most out of every combo.

A few hours into *Pedro*, however, reality starts to kick in. Barring one standout level (a pastel-coloured dreamscape set inside Pedro’s mind, which has you pirouetting to move screw platforms up and down beneath the gaze of giant, goggle-eyed heads), it’s a procession of dingy, near-identical warehouses. They’re all populated by enemies that never really change beyond having more health or a better gun –although a late-game shield mechanic does briefly delight.

Instead, the game’s second half becomes increasingly dedicated to precision platforming and a humdrum range of well-worn mechanics. This is not what anyone is playing *Pedro* for. Performing wall-jumps while shooting switches and avoiding lasers with a character who handles like a greased-up ferret with a fear of commitment is irritating – especially as your score depends on clearing a level as fast as possible, and pausing to puzzle out a labyrinth ruins your flow.

Even on repeat runs, when we know the level well, we still find ourselves struggling to up our game. There’s a general lack of clear signage: kickable items tend to blend into the scenery, so sometimes we notice a football we could have punted for extra points only after clearing a room. Floaty physics, meanwhile, soon become a problem when an absence of obvious visual feedback leaves us unable to instantly tell whether we’re currently in realtime or slow-mo, and toggle into the wrong mode only to be shot to ribbons.

We never manage to fully get our heads (and hands) around *Pedro*’s many inputs, either: we suspect from our previous demos that it’s a little easier to control on PC. You can remap them to whatever button you’d like, which is a thoughtful addition that sadly doesn’t count for much, in our experience. The dodge feels awkward on a Switch’s tiny shoulder button, so we decide to move it to a face button – but with equally critical actions jump, kick, reload and interact taking up all of them already, we abandon the idea. Slow-mo or no, a twitchy game such as this becomes frustrating when you feel like you’re not in possession of all the facts – or even all your thumbs.

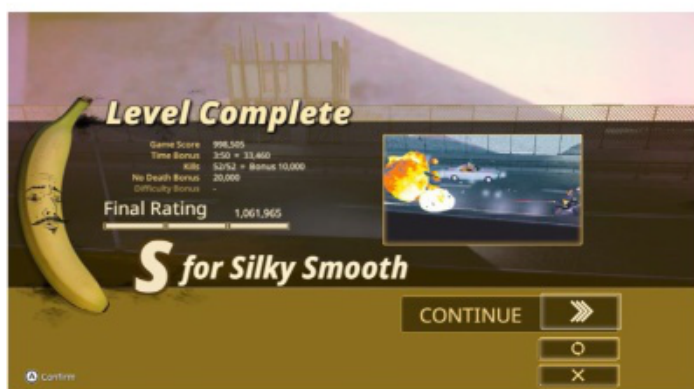
But it’s testament to the strength of *Pedro*’s core premise that you’ll likely persevere through design fumbles, odd pacing and wonky writing in search of more bonkers ultraviolet combos and leaderboard glory. The reality of *Pedro* may not quite have lived up to expectation, and that’s a shame. But when everything comes together, a gas canister we’ve just hoofed carving a gorgeous arc through the air before our spinning sniper rifle shot hits it at the perfect moment, the fantasy is still alive – and kicking.



LEFT The soundtrack is a *Hotline Miami*-lite affair, providing a suitably gritty tonal backdrop. One trailer's choice of classical music had us in stitches, though: we hope it's patched in as an option.

BELOW It can be hard to tell who's dead or alive when in slow-mo, which can lead to wasted bullets.

MAIN There's clear indication of where enemies are firing from, and a last-chance dodge mechanic saves us from disaster many a time



ABOVE It's now much simpler to connect shots in the first boss fight – to the extent that we rack up over a million points on our first go. Bosses are fun set-pieces, leaving the true test of skill to the less gimmicky levels





Ågren even handled sound design for his game. It's wonderfully done, a symphony of metallic pinging and crunchy gunfire

Post Script

For better and worse, *Pedro* bears the hallmarks of solo development

You can tell that *My Friend Pedro* was mostly made by one person. For a start, the credits are very brief: above a handful of musicians, publishing and PR staff, and those responsible for testing and porting the game, there's just one name next to a lot of jobs. Victor Ågren handled the design, art, code, story and sound design of *My Friend Pedro*. We can't imagine he's slept much over the past four-and-a-half years.

But as a result, the game has remained resolutely Ågren's creation from start to finish. It all began with his 2014 Newgrounds game of the same name: in the 2019 version, the homebrew spirit of the thing is preserved and, at times, elevated — even the 2019 *Pedro*'s final boss fight retains the essential absurdity of the Flash game, which pitted you against a giant bullet-spewing version of the developer himself. Ågren's decision to partner up with Devolver Digital was a sensible one; we suspect that almost any other publisher might have encouraged him to spike a few of his daffier ideas. Instead, we have *Pedro* as Ågren, and Ågren alone, intended it.

And that, in a purely philosophical sense for indie games, counts for plenty. It's the fulfilment of an aspirational dream for many: someone who had a brilliant idea for a game in their room one day, and set out to make it

reality with little more than the juice of their brain and the sweat of their brow. It is a romantic story that some of us never tire of hearing — and, as such, can be marketing gold. The story of the talented underdog always resonates. Indeed, journalists are sometimes guilty of tending towards it, as PR spiels play up a single marketable star at the expense of a less publicly visible team.

But *Pedro*, truly, was all Ågren, and what has no doubt been a long, lonely journey has more than paid off for the developer and publisher. The game sold 250,000 copies in its first week, and became Devolver's biggest Switch launch to date — and one of its best overall. It's a game with the sort of highly shareable, silly-but-clever imagery that, thanks to both Ågren's meticulous work and his personality, immediately catches the eye and tempts the hand towards the 'Purchase' button. A saucepan you can bounce bullets off. A skateboard kicked into a head.

It's all very *Internet*, in other words, even if its Flash-game roots mean that it's the Internet of several years ago. The tone swings between entry-level edgy and 'lol so random', and a tired meta joke about videogames always having an ugly-looking sewer section doesn't entirely make up for the levels that follow looking, well, ugly.

A bit of background chatter isn't enough to deter players from enjoying *Pedro*'s action, of course, but we can't help but feel that had Ågren had more people around him to gut-check some of the more outmoded humour, then maybe we'd have rolled our eyes a little less and laughed a little more. The story, too, may have come across better with a narrative designer at hand: there's a delightfully twisted tale here, but it's executed muddily and forgettably via some very poor pacing.

There are a few combat-centric details that we'd have loved to see refined, too. This is the beating heart of *Pedro*, and there's no getting away from the fact that our playtime is marred by indistinct visual cues, unreliable controls and a misplaced enthusiasm for platforming sections when all we really want is to unload bullets into creatively designed enemies. Ågren has had to wear a lot of hats: sharing the load among a team is a good way to ensure that you're getting a few different viewpoints on the issues. Still, with the lion's share (we hope) of a quarter of a million sales and counting, and his name firmly on the map, Ågren is in an excellent position to build a team for his next game if he so chooses — or, perhaps, to send singing telegrams of Nyan Cat to the **Edge** office in retaliation for our opinions. ■

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Cadence Of Hyrule

Oboe, maracas, glockenspiel and bass guitar: *Cadence Of Hyrule*'s unusual selection of musical instruments says a lot about the kind of game it is. And no, we don't mean it's the equivalent of an insufferable covers band performing twee versions of *Zelda* standards – which, in fairness, it could so easily have been. Rather, it understands how a series that's always marched to its own beat could still benefit from a fresh sound and a change of tempo.

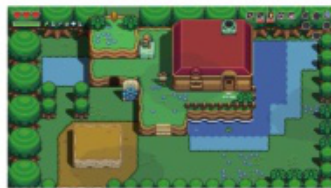
Delightfully (and rather damningly for Nintendo) it's also the first *Zelda* game where you can play as the princess from start to finish. Well, almost – a short prologue casts you as Cadence, whose working-class-hero credentials are established by her weapon of choice: a shovel. Finding herself in a Hyrule under threat from new antagonist Octavo (think *Skyward Sword*'s Ghirahim with a music-school scholarship) she gets to choose whether to first rouse a slumbering Link or Zelda. The other can be woken later, and once you've visited Cadence enough times, she becomes playable, too – you can switch between the three at Sheikah Stones scattered across Hyrule, which double as checkpoints and fast-travel locations. But if only for novelty's sake, we stick with *Zelda* for the six hours plus change it takes us to reach the end.

It's not the only reason why *Cadence Of Hyrule* takes a bit of getting used to. Those well-versed in *Crypt Of The Necrodancer*, the rhythmic Roguelike upon whose foundations this has been built, may well feel a little more comfortable. Otherwise, the opening hour leaves you in no uncertain terms that this is a very different breed of *Zelda* game. For starters, your chosen hero has a spring in their step – in every step – as they hop around this grid-based Hyrule. The lines are invisible when you're in a safe area or you've cleared a screen of enemies, but wandering into a group of Octoroks and Darknuts is like stepping onto a chequered dance floor, with Danny Baranowsky's soundtrack offering a pick-and-remix of *Zelda* themes from throughout the series. You'll tap your feet, not just because the score compels you to, but to keep time, since your power increases the longer you go without mistiming a step or taking a hit. Meanwhile, in keeping with the turn-based formula of its predecessor, enemies move when you do – and if you don't act on every beat, when you don't.

With just three hearts, there's little margin for error in the early stages. It's a chastening opening, perhaps even for practised *Necrodancers*: there are just enough differences that you'll likely see the continue screen a good few times, though here at least you won't have to start all over again. Diamonds you've earned for fully clearing screens or dungeon floors of monsters can be spent on tools for next time, whether it's a torch to increase your range of vision in darker areas, a spade to dig through walls, or a ring that makes shops lower their

Developer Brace Yourself Games
Publisher Nintendo
Format Switch
Release Out now

Wandering into a group of Octoroks and Darknuts is like stepping onto a chequered dance floor



PUSH THE TEMPO

While seasoned *Crypt*-clearers will likely breeze through *Cadence*'s mid-game, a permadeath option ups the ante – and it's mandatory for its Daily Challenge mode. Elsewhere, you can raise the tempo with Double-Time mode, which reduces what negligible thinking time you have to nil. And if that's not tough enough, there's an unlockable character who starts out with just one heart and can't use swords. At the other end of the difficulty scale, those with no sense of rhythm can enable Fixed Beat mode, which means you no longer have to time your actions to the music. Or you could try playing in co-op, which should reduce your number of visits to the continue screen – not least since you can revive your partner at any Sheikah Stone.

prices. Yet you surrender most of your gear upon death, while other items will deteriorate through use – which seems unusual for *Zelda* until you remember *Breath Of The Wild*'s breakable weapons. In other words, death carries a sting, but it's a pain you can soothe relatively quickly. Particularly once you've infused a weapon or two with obsidian or titanium.

Besides, before long you'll have accumulated a few more hearts and some armour, letting you soak up more hits. And the ability to go just about anywhere – barring a few rooms which require specific items – means the difficulty curve steadily flattens out and the game hits its stride. That's partly because by then you'll have adjusted to the metre of the music. It's not always easy to divine whether you've achieved a flow state, or whether you got through that room with a dozen enemies by happy accident, but at times you'll find your fingers moving faster than your brain can register, as you jab left, stab right, step up, dodge back and parry without missing a beat. Then you can start showing off, thumping a war drum to power up your next attack, or holding an arrow and swivelling on one beat, before releasing it on the next. Some of the best loot lies behind optional challenges that take things a step further: one type of chest locks after a given number of turns, while another only yields its contents to those who survive a screen unscathed.

You might miss some of this, however. Since you have relatively free rein, you can seek out the four instruments and then head straight for Hyrule Castle. Yet it's worth exploring the region's farthest reaches before the climactic showdown, since it's here that the difficulty ramps back up. One late-game puzzle hinges upon a very specific action that's never explained and isn't used elsewhere. And the final areas increase the challenge through sheer weight of numbers: dungeons appear rather overstuffed with enemies, all but forcing you to have at least one fairy or potion spare, if not power shoes and armour besides. Occasionally, its procedural elements throw up insurmountable obstacles, too – though strumming a lute spirits you back to the nearest entrance, it's a clumsy kind of solution.

Yet these are trifling complaints in light of *Cadence Of Hyrule*'s many joys, such as the moment you detect an extra layer to the music, which builds almost imperceptibly until you burst through a door to find a shopkeeper trilling the melody to himself. And with Paul Veer's characterful art breathing new energy into this top-down vision of Hyrule, you'll be convinced that Nintendo should give more indie developers the keys to its kingdoms. *Jeff Minter's F-Zero? Simogo x Splatoon?* Whether it's a one-off spin-off, or the start of a wave of collaborative crossovers, this charming, eccentric mash-up is well worth a spin.

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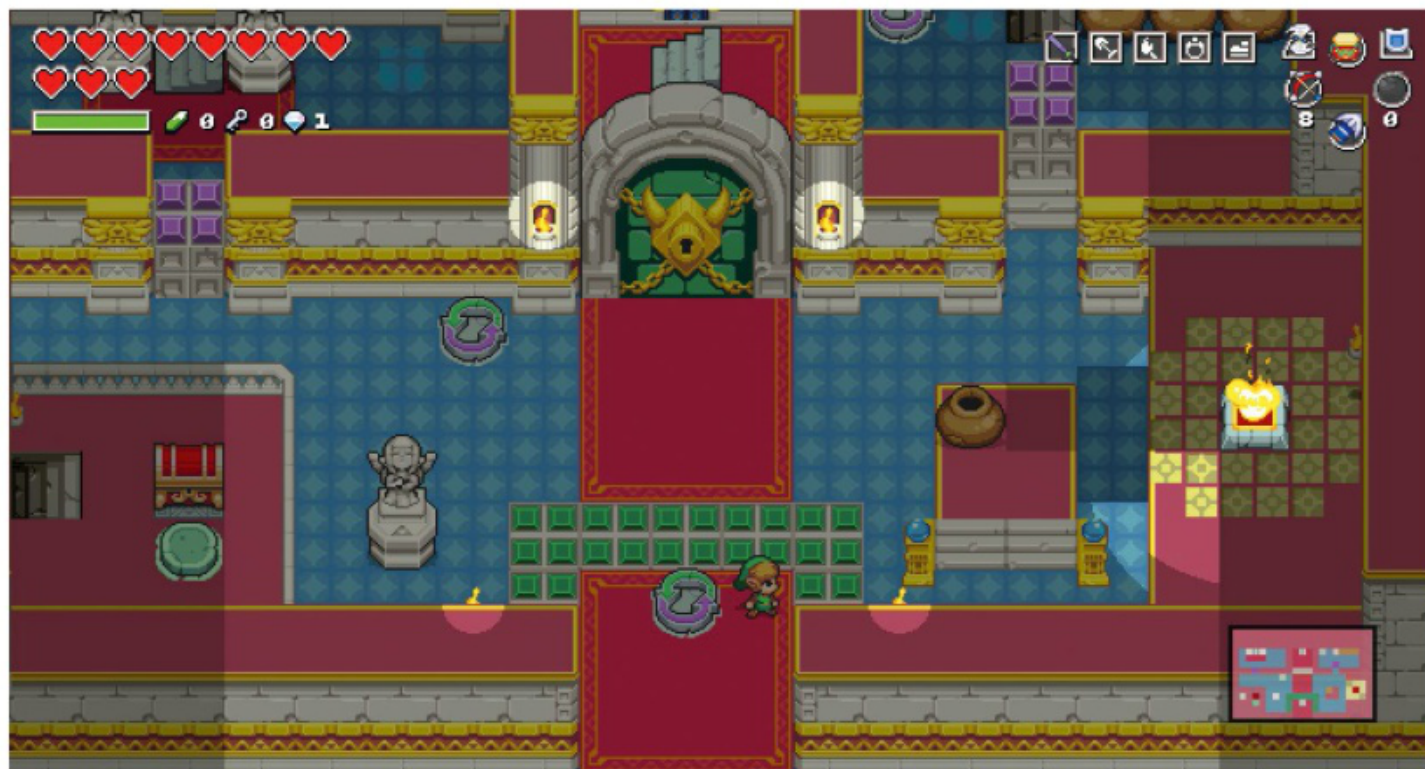
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RIGHT These pressure plates let you switch between Link and Zelda. By series standards, even the more involving puzzles are relatively straightforward – though between prioritising threats and keeping to the beat, there’s lots to think about.

MAIN Mastering Link’s shield is key. While it’s tempting to rely on your sword – or flail, or spear – reflecting projectiles and parrying attacks is the quickest way to deal with a number of enemy types.

BOTTOM Occasionally you’ll be asked to recreate famous *Zelda* melodies by following a sequence of musical notes. It’s basic stuff, but at least the music’s good



ABOVE Which came first, the instruments or the excruciating boss puns? In truth, these fights don't feel as elegant as classic *Zelda* boss battles, and with a half-decent build they go down very quickly indeed

The Sinking City

Unknowable gods who dwell in the deeps; strange dreams that bleed into reality; an accursed seaside New England town, the waves slowly eroding its sanity. There's a whole lot of HP Lovecraft in *The Sinking City*, which gleefully mashes up elements from numerous short stories – the half-ape people of Facts Concerning The Late Arthur Jermyn And His Family bumping up against the Innsmouthers, whose ancestors are Deep Ones from beneath the ocean. But for each disparate element it pulls in, developer Frogwares is careful to get the details right.

“Bulgy, stary eyes that never seem to shut, and their skin ain't quite right. Rough and scabby, and the sides of their necks are all shrivelled or creased up,” is how Lovecraft described the ichthyic inhabitants of Innsmouth – words which Frogwares brings to life with startling clarity. In fact, this could describe most characters you meet, regardless of whether they have undersea ancients in their family tree. Characters' eyes are too big, strangely watery or fogged over entirely. The skin is stretched a little too tight over their bones, or shows hints of mange. It's uncanny in a way that feels appropriate to the source material. The same goes for Oakmont, Massachusetts, the aquatically challenged town of the title. It's a new creation but could easily, in all its dreariness, be Lovecraft's Innsmouth. The trouble is that Lovecraft, among his many flaws – chiefly the racism which this game, to its credit, makes a point of denouncing – was not a very good level designer.

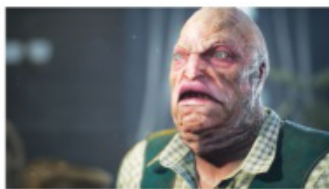
The Sinking City is something of a departure for Frogwares, previously best known for its *Sherlock Holmes* series. Once again, you play a detective – trading deerstalker for fedora, as 1920s private eye Charles Reed – and are equipped with many of the same tools: the casebook, the ‘mind palace’, the ability to magically reconstruct events from a handful of clues. But unlike those games, every crime scene here is connected by an explorable overworld: Oakmont.

The city can be navigated on foot and, in the case of its more waterlogged areas, by boat. Both methods of traversal are a little cumbersome and, aside from the odd bit of loot or XP, there's not much reward for exploring. Oakmont consists mostly of empty spaces, without much in the way of incident or spectacle to set one area apart from another, and its crooked streets – this might be an American city, but the grid system is nowhere to be seen – are tricky to navigate without referring to the map screen. This might be intended to evoke the town's maddening influence, but it makes for a space that's not particularly interesting to inhabit.

The investigations themselves fare a little better. While the cases are less bespoke than in a *Sherlock* adventure, they're enlivened by the setting's supernatural elements. A standard-issue detective-

Developer Frogwares
Publisher Bigben Interactive
Format PC (tested), PS4, Switch, Xbox One
Release Out now (Switch TBA)

Oakmont consists mostly of empty spaces, without much in the way of incident or spectacle



NO PRIDE IN PREJUDICE

The Sinking City opens with a message that acknowledges the prejudices of Lovecraft's time – albeit not specifically of the author himself – and states that, while they are wrong, the developer does not want to whitewash its setting. This is certainly better than unquestioningly grabbing Lovecraft's aesthetic, and helps contextualise some of its elements: namely, the subspecies of gorilla- and fish-people, which in the original works were metaphors for Lovecraft's horrific views on ‘miscegenation’, a bigoted word that doesn't deserve to be let out of those quotation marks. It's very dangerous territory, and the game is careful to separate these animalised people from its characters of colour and the prejudices they face – but we're not sure Frogwares ever quite earns the imagery of oppression it's borrowing from.

vision mode, for example, is paired with a sanity meter. Use it for too long, or in areas which are psychically dangerous, and the screen will distort, causing the world to swim, and flash up intrusive images. Reed himself might start batting away unseen flies, or put a pistol to his own head. It's not the most sensitive portrayal of mental illness, but as a representation of Lovecraft's cosmic horror, it's certainly effective.

Each case is composed of a few parts. You might explore a location in point-and-click fashion, picking up and studying items. Alternatively, it might require combing through the archives at a police station or newspaper office, using a simple three-part search function or tapping into Reed's retrocognition abilities, which function like a simplified *Return Of The Obra Dinn*. You step through a tear in reality and into spectral monochrome recreations, where you access tableaux of posed figures accompanied with a single line of dialogue to help piece together the order of events. Whichever method is used, the output is the same: clues you can study in the somewhat grandiosely named mind palace. In practice, this is a menu where you can plug one clue into another. Get the pairing correct, and the game will spit out a deduction that can be used to advance the plot. It all adds to a varied and perfectly entertaining method of solving mysteries, albeit one that never reaches the heights of an *Obra Dinn* or *Her Story*.

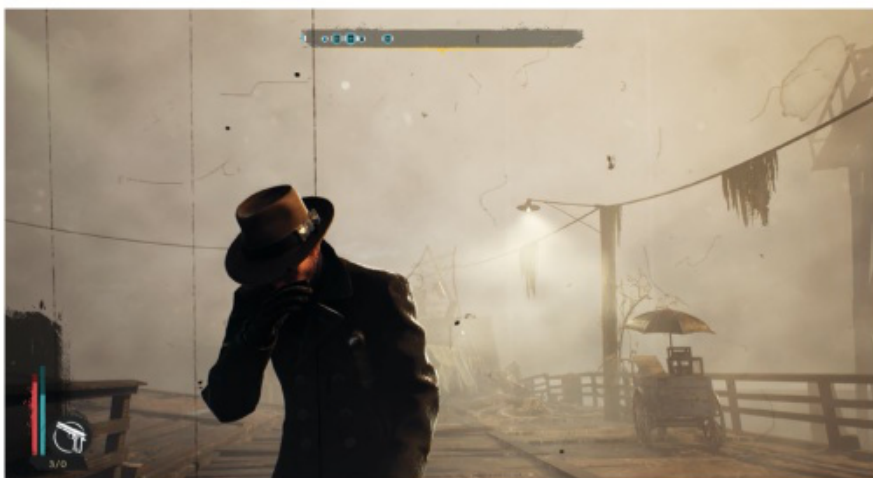
The problem is everything that connects these investigations. As you move through the city, you might encounter wylebeasts – creatures with truly troubling designs inspired equally by the ocean floor and human innards – but the resulting combat is generally to be avoided. Bullets are the local currency, a neat detail of world-building which results in every shot feeling wasteful and, in tandem with the fairly perfunctory gunplay, pushes you towards flight rather than fight. Again there's a sense of intent here – Lovecraft stories are rarely about fighting the monsters, after all – but it's undermined by the fact that each kill gives you a handful of XP. The skill tree where these points are spent feels superfluous, offering incremental improvements on your existing abilities rather than adding anything new. We find our skill points stacking up, unspent and forgotten in a dusty corner of the pause menu.

Without any interesting diversions to offer you, Oakmont isn't meaningfully an open world. It's dead space to be waded through so you can access the next menu screen in your investigation. This is a shame, as there are occasional eye-catching details which add up to a pervasive atmosphere of dread: a fisherman sat atop a sunken gate, armchairs bobbing in the murky waters, the spokes of an atrophied Ferris wheel silhouetted against a grey sky. Oakmont is a convincing Lovecraftian town – but the point of those stories is that these are places you'd never want to find yourself.

RIGHT As well as all the Lovecraftian cosmic horror you'd expect, *The Sinking City* isn't afraid to turn to more direct tools of the trade, like rotting flesh, skittering arachnoid creatures and a good old-fashioned hanging body.

MAIN Reed's trusty aquatic steed is christened 'Cyclops II', a reference to the sunken navy vessel which first brought him into contact with the Old Ones.

BOTTOM Insanity, in *The Sinking City*, looks a lot like the kind of grainy faux-vintage filter you'd apply to an Instagram pic to give it that extra bit of 'authenticity'



ABOVE Charles Reed, with his constantly red-rimmed eyes, is the most convincingly exhausted videogame protagonist we've ever come across. Are we really 100 per cent sure the man doesn't work in print media?

Sea Of Solitude

Sea Of Solitude mixes dream with autobiography to create a vivid, but deeply dissatisfying, tale of trauma and transcendence. It takes place on a shimmering tropical ocean, with protagonist Kay waking in a motorboat to find herself transformed into a beast. Not far below the water's surface lies a city — a half-remembered, half-imagined labyrinth of pastel bricks, thickly moulded domes, wave-lapped conservatories and plazas. The city has no inhabitants, but it does harbour plenty of thoughts and memories, each as monstrous as Kay has become, with inky-black feathers and glaring crimson eyes.

Some of these phantoms take the form of spiteful children, shoving you back from doorways as you explore those parts of the city that are above water. Other, larger entities roam the skies on dusty wings or weave through sunken streets, crooning at you through mouthfuls of arm-length teeth. Your task as Kay is to reconcile with these menacing apparitions, unravelling the pain they make manifest, in the process returning yourself to human form. To begin with, you have to avoid some, like the creature in the depths. You can drive others back, firing bolts of light from Kay's palm to evaporate the darkness that clings to them.

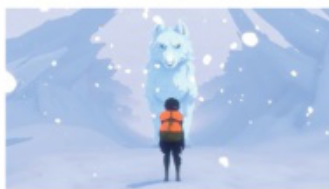
One obvious source of inspiration is *The Legend Of Zelda: The Wind Waker*, which features another blissful ocean that veils and preserves the secrets of the past. *Sea Of Solitude* takes a similar delight in the heave and fracturing of water, Kay's boat churning up a great carpet of foam as you pull up to the jetties that serve as checkpoints. It also borrows *Wind Waker's* companionable seabirds, one of two kinds of collectible waiting to be dislodged from the city's crevices. These points of comparison spark the hope that this game will put the myth-sodden geography of *Zelda* to more explicit psychological purpose, as though you'd plunged to *Wind Waker's* seabed and found the ruins of *Silent Hill*. Sadly, *Sea Of Solitude* struggles to convey much nuance through its tired collection of puzzle and platforming challenges, which reduce complex conditions such as depression to, well, game mechanics. Its tale of personal anguish may come from the heart, but it lands with all the grace of a cannonball.

As is made plain from its opening screen, the game is the memoir of creative director Cornelia Geppert, an allegory for her own mental health struggles following a difficult break-up. Geppert and Jo-Mei deserve no little praise for tackling such difficult subjects, but their investigations of family strife and despair are too literal to be engaging. For all its choice of setting, this is an experience with little undercurrent.

The game's tasks and challenges are all metaphors, and all of those metaphors are crushingly obvious. It's reliant, above all, on the creaky symbolism of light versus darkness. Aside from keeping shadows at bay,

Developer Jo-Mei Games
Publisher Electronic Arts
Format PC (tested), PS4, Xbox One
Release Out now

What ambiguity the mechanics and setting foster is resolutely steamed out by the writing



LINE AND SINKER

While chapter-based and made up of linear puzzles, *Sea Of Solitude* quietly encourages you to tack back and forth across its world in search of collectibles — seagulls aside, there are cursory bottled messages from another character. The back-tracking is most engrossing when it involves revisiting an area to mess around with the water level. At scripted intervals, you can part the sea Old Testament-style to walk the drowned city at leisure and relive moments of Kay's life there. It recalls the recent *Gris* from Nomada Studios, in which a single place is slowly transformed as you move through its story. Unfortunately, the transformation element here isn't nearly as elaborate.

Kay's flares reveal certain invisible objects, including pockets of energy that can be channelled through her body to blast one particular recurring horror out of the path. Another frequent gambit is sucking plumes of shadow into Kay's bulging rucksack to expose things she's forgotten, flushing out the disembodied voices of loved ones while opening the route ahead. Later on, there are "boss battles" in which you try to keep crowds of shadow-children away from a ball of fire. There is a meditation on absentee fathers in which you scale a tower made up of powerful air vents while a giant chameleon bemoans his need for space.

The light/dark binary is challenged later in the game, as Kay begins to realise that eviscerating her demons may only amplify them. But what ambiguity the mechanics and setting foster is resolutely steamed out by the writing. *Sea Of Solitude's* cast is surprisingly talkative, even the members who consist mostly of tentacles, and none really bother to hide what they represent. Kay herself is a fount of needless observations, forever asking herself questions like, "Is this real?" There's a sense that *Sea Of Solitude* doesn't quite know whether it's for the young or the old. It has all the moralising directness of a children's bedtime story, but unlike most bedtime stories, it also has swearing, discussion of suicide and the crunch of gristle in the maws of aquatic predators. It might have helped if Jo-Mei had hired a professional voice actor for Kay — she's brought to life, instead, by lead animator Miriam Jud, who never sounds convinced by what she's reading.

It's a shame, because *Sea Of Solitude* can be quite evocative when it isn't forcing you through a so-so jump puzzle or telling you exactly what its monsters stand for. The swimming leviathan is a presence throughout, and the most compelling of the game's nightmares. Surviving its attentions is straightforward — you wait for it to move away before swimming on — but it's chilling to catch sight of the creature's tail disappearing around a corner, or feel its enormous body rock the platform you're standing on. We can imagine liking a game that is exclusively about Kay and that creature, a creature that lurks within parts of herself she can no longer reach.

There's also the weather, which shifts according to Kay's mood. In areas you've cleared (for the moment) of rogue memories, the water lifts and glitters beneath an electric blue sky, tempting you to loiter in the shallows. But then you spot a gray nimbus at the end of a flooded plaza, like a smear on the lens, and are back in a world of fog and night. Some of the game's finest effects lie on the border between these realities, paradise and abyss dividing across the bestial figure of Kay herself. There's definitely a kind of magic to discover here, but *Sea Of Solitude* too often breaks its own spell.



ABOVE There's no combat in *Sea Of Solitude*, though there are certainly plenty of things that can do you harm. Monsters may intimidate you, but the idea is often to talk things out, not to punch them to a messy pulp



TOP Unity-powered environments eschew complex geometry in favour of clean lines, chapter-defining shifts in colour palette and lovely comic-book water effects.

MAIN Kay's appearance evokes the vengeful scratching of pen on parchment. Her backpack may seem a little incongruous, but it pays into one of the game's defter thematic reversals.

LEFT The puzzles often feel rather makeshift. Here, the idea is to kite your shadowy attackers around so that you can slip past and out of their aggro zone

Samurai Shodown

Samurai Shodown is a game in which you think you're doing okay, then look at your health bar and realise you're about to die. In this wonderfully attractive and vividly animated game, even light attacks look like they hurt. And they do, to a point. But medium slashes hurt more, and heavies even more than that. Then there are dashing slashes, and counter-hits, and a variety of other ways to increase the damage output of a certain attack. You can spend 40 seconds chipping away at an opponent, playing the match perfectly, at least in conventional fighting-game terms. Two heavy hits later you find yourself fighting for survival.

This is jarring at first, but it's no bad thing. You'll learn to recognise when a massive hit has been landed without needing to glance at your health bar; with so many strengths of attack, this is a game that virtually fetishises hit-pause. When a big hit arrives you can practically stick the kettle on. And once you make the adjustment, you'll realise that it's entirely in keeping with the spirit, and intent, of the game. *Samurai Shodown* is not a game of 100-hit touch-of-death combos. It is a game of purity, of tremendous risk and enormous reward. It is a game of skill. But moreover, it is a battle of wits, the delicious psychology inherent in the genre brought to the fore. Either you predict what your opponent will do next, or you coach them into doing what you want them to do. Then one of you gets punished, and heavens above does it hurt.

Special move inputs are almost identical across the cast, and ask of you nothing more difficult than a Hadoken or Shoryuken motion. Every character has one super move, and each is performed with the same combination of joystick motions and button presses. Other vital moves share the same commands, too. The results are twofold: first, it makes it easy to hop around the cast in search of the character that best fits your playstyle; second, it means that, when you get hit by something, you likely know exactly what it was – and that, in all likelihood, your character has a similar move of their own.

Knowing your opponent's available tools is vital if you're to be successful in a fighting game, and this levelling of the playing field helps tremendously in that regard. Similarly, your super is available from the first second of the first round, and can be used at any time – but it can only be performed once per match. If your opponent burns it in the first round, sure, you'll lose 60 per cent of your life bar. But from that moment on, you know your opponent's toolset just shrank, and that you have a theoretical advantage by simple virtue of still having it available. And when you do decide to use it it's rewarding in the extreme, even before you look at its effect on the opponent's health bar. Characters turn monochrome, the backdrop turns bright red, the enemy

Developer/publisher SNK
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

This is a game of very few combos, and matches are often won and lost to single hits



DEAD AS A DOJO

With Story mode lasting even completionists no more than a few hours, the meat of the singleplayer game comes from Dojo mode, which lets you face off against AI versions of real-world players. Supposedly using machine learning to create an AI warrior that mimics your own playstyle, it's a fine idea, though in practice those we've found so far have either been absolutely useless or stone-cold killers. You can even download your own ghost data in order to identify patterns or persistent mistakes in your play, though if you're struggling in the harsh wastelands of the online mode this can feel a bit like rubbing it in. Yes, all right, we know we jump too much. We promise we're working on it.

sliced to ribbons as your warrior grins in extreme close-up. Even in open play this is a delightful-looking game, reprising the thick, inky outlines of *Street Fighter IV*, a game many of *Samurai Shodown*'s development team worked on while at Dimps.

Similar spectacle is available using the Rage Gauge, which builds up as you get hit or perform Just Defends by blocking just before an attack connects. So far, so genre-standard comeback mechanic. Rage is different, however. Yes, fill it and you'll gain access to a hugely damaging super move. But using it burns the entire bar for the rest of the match, and you'll be missing out on so much more. When the gauge is full, your basic attacks dramatically increase in power, and specials essentially become EX versions of themselves, hitting more times for more damage. You also gain access to perhaps the most powerful move in the game, the deliciously titled Weapon Flipping Technique, or WFT. Land it, and you'll disarm your opponent, forcing them to fight with stubby limbs till they somehow gain enough ground to safely reacquire their weapons. Disarms can be performed in open play, irrespective of Rage meter, using a counter move with punishingly tight timing. But the WFT is an offensive manoeuvre – and, crucially, one that can be performed again if it misses, over and over until it connects.

If all this paints a picture of a rather slow game, then you're wrong. It's much slower than that. This is a game of very few combos (if you can link a special move off a medium, you're doing well) and matches are often won and lost to single hits, to decisions or reactions made in a few frames. It's patient, cagey stuff, as *SamSho* always has been. But it feels all the more so now, in an era where fighting games prize spectacle and ludicrous super moves more than ever. It feels special.

It is far from the complete package, admittedly. A spartan set of core systems means SNK arguably can be excused for the game's whisper of a tutorial, but it falls into the same old genre trap: telling you how to do something, having you perform it once, then moving on to the next task. The roster is small by modern standards, though in fairness that makes for an easier game to learn. The so-called story mode is really just an arcade ladder with a few cutscenes sprinkled in, and the online offering is as barebones as they come.

The netcode hasn't been great either – a consequence, perhaps, of this game occupying a niche within a niche. After all, if you're bad at fighting games, why would you want to play one where you can die in a few hits? The answer to that is obvious: you can kill in a few hits too. You will look absolutely sumptuous while you do so, and feel pretty fantastic as well. Take it slow, keep an eye on those health bars, and you'll find a fighting game that offers a thrill that few others can – with nary a 20-hit combo in sight.



ABOVE Nakoruru, a series stalwart, has the odds stacked against her given her slender frame and the fact that she fights with a short kodachi sword. Being able to use a hawk for projectile attacks balances things out, though



TOP Fatal Flash moves are the most damaging in the game, and some of the easiest of the lot to perform, especially if you've mapped button combinations to spare inputs.

MAIN Remember what we said about how powerful even basic attacks are? This is a standing heavy slash. The blood effects can be turned off, if you prefer.

RIGHT If the combo count is that high, it's probably because you just used a multi-hit special move. While it takes time to adjust to not having many combos available, over time you appreciate how easy it is to pick up new characters



198X

Our story begins in mesmerising style. A subway train crawls across a flickering switchboard cityscape. The train pulls into a station, a gaunt figure in jeans alights, and suddenly we are playing *Streets Of Rage*, or something close to it, crushing punks with our fists and feet. Half visual novel and half retro compilation, *198X* tells the tale of a moody '80s teen through five snazzy homages to classic arcade genres. Each component game models a moment of personal growth – such as a high school crush or a family row – using cherished vintage design elements and motifs. It's an engrossing premise, a life refracted through the amber chambers of software. If only the Kid's story were as worthwhile as the ways their story is told.

In beautifully hand-drawn cutscenes, we see them shuffling through suburbia, a self-dramatising loner with a Breakfast Club slouch and an omnipresent Walkman, yearning for the City that tantalises on the horizon. The writing recalls the wearisome faux-outsider pop-philosophising of an Ernest Kline novel. "I used to love the weekends, watching early morning cartoons without a care in the world," the Kid pines. Alas, "everyone got brainwashed, people started seeing you the way they wanted you to see you." Fortunately,

At just an hour-and-a-half long, *198X* feels too brisk, and there's not much to go back to save replaying its component games out of order. The game was originally planned to be longer, but was split in two. Sadly, it shows

Developer/publisher Hi-Bit Studios
Format PC (tested), PS4, Switch, Xbox One
Release Out now



SOUND CHECK

Hi-Bit Studios is based in Stockholm, but its 11 members hail from as far away as Japan. Composer Yuzo Koshiro is an old hand at the arcade: his experience stems back to the original *Streets Of Rage* and *Shinobi* titles, whose scores set the standard for their eras. His recent work includes *Super Smash Bros Ultimate* and *Etrian Odyssey*. It's also rumoured that he's contributing to DotEmu's forthcoming *Streets Of Rage 4*, closing the circle on his career.

the Kid discovers an arcade full of fellow "outcasts and misfits" in which "another life was just a credit away."

These corny musings leave a sour taste, and the Kid's anti-charisma takes *198X*'s standout elements – the arcade recreations – prisoner. There's a shoot-'em-up in the vein of *R-Type*, cruisers careening among asteroids; a tribute to *Out Run* which plays upon the City's inaccessibility; and a nod to *Shinobi* that feels closer to one of Flash gaming's endless runners. The latter chafes, requiring you to memorise the precise order of enemies, but each game is otherwise a treat, with large sprites, handsome backdrops and nifty chiptune scores.

Alienation may breed monsters, and there's a menace to the Kid's listless stare that developer Hi-Bit Studios might have taken further. At its most searching, *198X* reveals how its protagonist's disgruntlement arises from the games it channels, each a snapshot of real-world disaffection. The vigilante curb-stomping lowlives, the urban racer side-swiping civilian cars, and behind them all, the indolent nerd, resentful of a world that hasn't given them a waypoint. The fifth and final minigame, a cyberpunk maze RPG comparable to *Wizardry 5*, makes the Kid's growing rancour explicit: the ensuing "happy ending" is posed as empowering, but feels rather like the origin point for a serial killer. There's an involving, and sinister, story to pursue on that front, but as with the City the Kid yearns for, *198X* never gets there.

5



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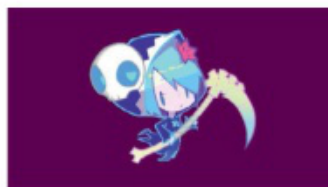
Muse Dash

There are some things about *Muse Dash* that we understand perfectly: the loading screen, for instance. Rather than, say, a shot of our heroines' faces, we're repeatedly confronted with a close crop of their groins and legs. Lest we assume that this bright, two-button *DJMax*-a-like is *all* about rhythm heaven, this is a reminder that a large portion of its intended audience is simply here for the waifu factor.

Which, you know, *fine*, if that's your thing. But it's sad to see *Muse Dash* so blatantly place itself in an adult category (the attention lavished on its character select screen's pendulous animations is astonishing) while also doing so much for the younger crowd. A rhythm game dressed up as a brawler is a broadly accessible concept that could tempt many newcomers into a niche genre. You hit one button to have your character hit grounded pink enemies, another to leap up and bash high-flying blue ones. Sometimes you must hit both notes together, or unleash a barrage of button-mashing blows on a boss character. Circular saws in the floor are cleverly coloured blue to tell your brain to hit high to evade them, and ghosts become invisible before they reach your hit zone, demanding that you properly internalise the beat rather than merely seeing it.

Enemy designs are delightful, if not exactly cohesive: one moment, you'll be smacking a winged hi-fi, the next a cowboy blob riding an ice cream cone. There are only four backgrounds in the game, which gets old fast

Developer XD Network Inc
Publisher PeroPeroGames
Format Android, iOS, PC, Switch (tested)
Release Out now



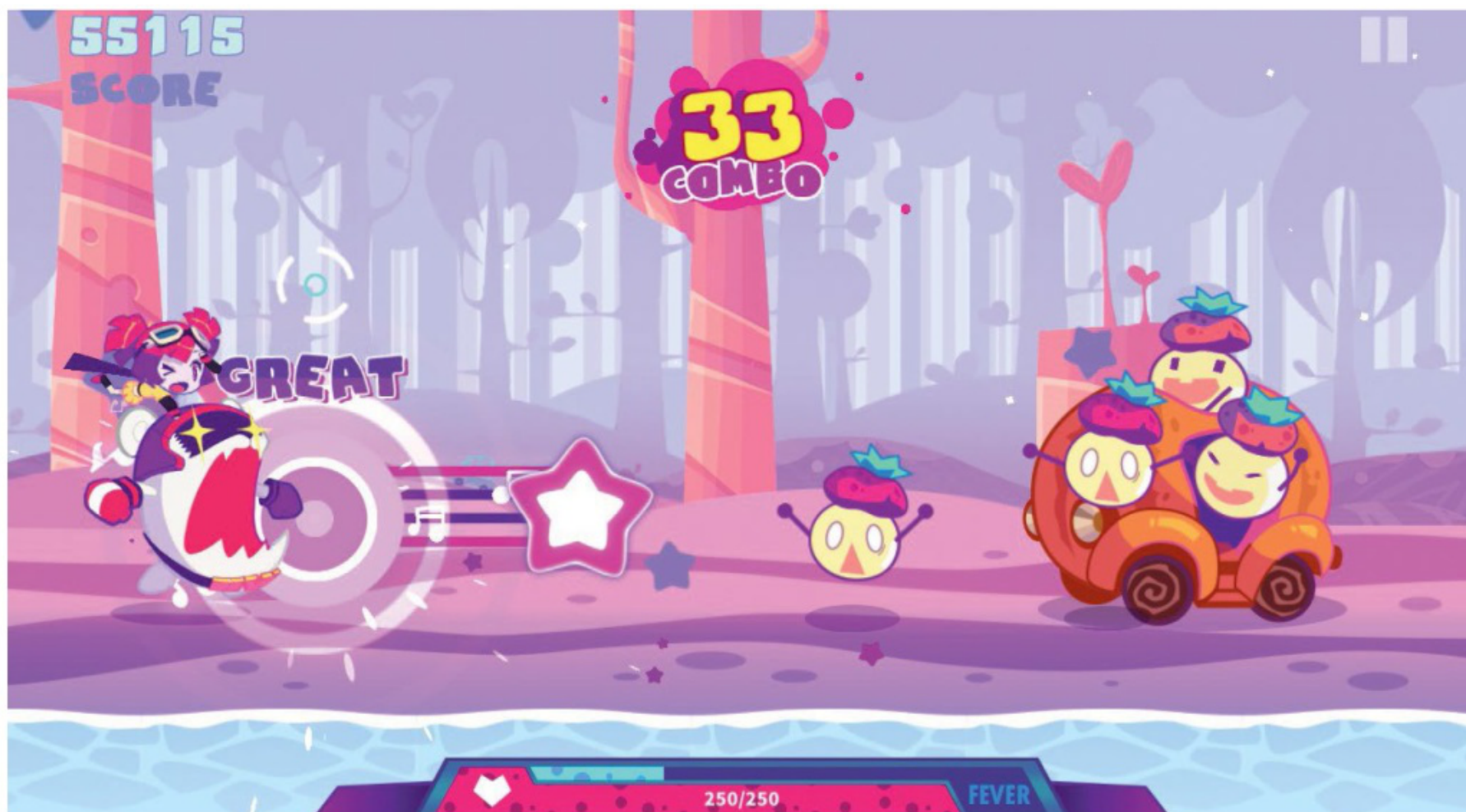
SNAP DECISIONS

Progression is tied to unlocking new outfits for idols Rin, Buro and Marija, all of which grant helpful passives such as higher HP or more bonus points when collecting score-boosting Notes – and most of which are quite, quite grubby. Equippable Elfin's are slightly safer for work, a range of companions that can add more modifiers: Thanatos, for instance, gives you two seconds of invincibility on taking a hit or picking up a heart. Thank goodness it doesn't make half the notes disappear.

Controls are responsive (we prefer buttons to the touchscreen on Switch, as the Joy-Cons and bezel force our thumbs to stretch awkwardly), although a lack of smooth transitional animations for moving high and low imparts a visual stiffness. The charts are deftly arranged, notes following melodies and beats that feel natural. And your mileage may vary depending on your tolerance for C-pop, but there are some real bangers in *Muse Dash* – not least Disco Night, a song that sonically presents an alternate universe in which Carly Rae Jepsen turned into a Vocaloid and got really good at playing sexy cowbell riffs over dubstep.

Bonkers, yes. But *Muse Dash* soon becomes baffling in less endearing ways. You unlock songs and a variety of troubling idol outfits by completing stages and challenges – the latter poorly explained by wonky localisation. We can parse “totally collect 100 Notes”, but “achieve 5 ‘Miss’ judgements” is a contradiction in terms. Progression depends on random item drops and soon slows to a crawl. It's the overall lack of difficulty that confuses most: Easy is a cakewalk, Hard a decent trial, but grown-ups will want Master – and even then not for long. Genre fans will quickly tire of its shallow challenge, but we wouldn't let a child within ten feet of this. Even if *Muse Dash* has much to teach them about the joys of rhythm games, we'd prefer not to have to explain that loading screen.

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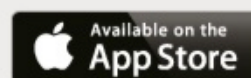


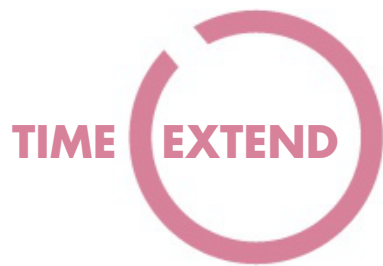
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Papers, Please

Struggling against the oppressive
systems of a totalitarian regime

By **ANDREAS IDERWILDI**

Developer/publisher 3909 LLC Format iOS, PC, Vita Release 2013



Almost six years after its release, playing Lucas Pope's *Papers, Please* is still a unique, at times even revolutionary experience. Sure, its influence can be felt in a handful of political titles such as PanicBarn's dystopian Brexit bouncer simulation *Not Tonight*, but for the most part, it's been left unemulated. It's not hard to see why. It's an uncomfortable and oppressive game, its genre-blend of work simulation and puzzle game exactly tailored to its biting political satire. It's not the kind of game that lends itself to spawning its own sub-genre. In light of the last couple of years' political events, however, its subject matter is as relevant today as it was at the time of its release.

Papers, Please, a self-titled "dystopian document thriller," puts you in the shoes of a nameless, faceless immigration inspector in the fictional Eastern Bloc state of Arstotzka in the year 1982. It's your job to inspect the papers of immigrants trying to cross Arstotzka's western border in East Grestin, which it shares with its former enemy Kolechia. The war has only just ended, and the tensions are palpable. Each day, a new bulletin from the Ministry Of Admissions is waiting on your desk. Read it carefully, because it gives you detailed instructions of who to admit and who to deny, and the rules change frequently.

Oppressive systems and cruel authoritarian regimes are a common theme in videogames, but our protagonists usually meet them head-on. *Papers, Please*, on the other hand, is about being part of an oppressive system, and fighting or overt resistance is never an option. Instead, your path to success is to compromise: between survival and your ethics, your own needs and those of others. No matter what you do, you're always caught between being both a victim and a perpetrator. Even if you decide to support the mysterious revolutionary group EZIC to sabotage the regime, you must do so within the parameters imposed on you by the system, keeping up the façade of a loyal immigration inspector.

In the beginning the parameters are simple enough. Arstotzkan citizens seeking

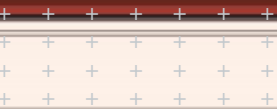
re-entry need a valid ID and passport. Foreigners need an entry permit in addition to their passport. If everything's in order you stamp the documents with the green stamp, making a satisfying thud. But you'll be forced to make liberal use of the red stamp as well. If you're lucky, people are simply missing the required documents, but more often than not, the devil's in the details. There's a dizzying number of grounds on which to turn someone away: documents may have expired; an arrival's appearance on their papers may not match their appearance in real life; the passport's issuing city may be incorrect. A missing or faulty seal may point towards a forgery, while a discrepancy between a person's actual weight and the weight given on an identity supplement could indicate a smuggler or a terrorist carrying weapons.

Once a discrepancy is noticed, you must correlate two conflicting elements to enable interrogation of the applicant. If in doubt, you take their fingerprints to compare them to your records, or, more intrusive, strip-search or even detain them. The immigrants are entirely at your mercy, but you're exercising a power you did not ask for and that feels profoundly uncomfortable. From the start, you get a feeling for Arstotzka's power through the realisation that you're nothing but a tool in the regime's hands.

There are separate rules for citizens, immigrants, visitors, journalists, diplomats and asylum seekers, members of each group requiring their own specific set of papers. Over time, new documents are introduced, such as vaccination certifications during a polio outbreak in a neighbouring country. On some days, there are additional rules. Perhaps you are instructed to turn away all citizens from Obristan as retaliation against trade sanctions. Or perhaps you're ordered to confiscate all passports from Arstotzkan citizens from a certain district whose loyalty to the regime has become suspect. Soon, your work station becomes a mess of documents, bulletins and other items such as bribes and flyers dropped off by applicants as you desperately try to maintain order by shuffling papers around.

As if all of this weren't enough, there are refugees pleading with you to let them in, a list of wanted criminals who might or ►

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might not show up at your booth, members of EZIC urging you to let in spies or even assassinate someone by applying poison to their passport, frequent terrorist attacks which require you to quickly drop a key in a tumbler to get access to a tranq gun, and many more moments that demand split-second decisions to novel situations and moral dilemmas. Some of these incidents can kick off an entire series of events that resemble sub-quests with multiple, sometimes very dramatic outcomes.

All the while, the clock is ticking, and slip-ups are punishable by fines. Even though *Papers, Please* is at its heart a puzzle game, the pressures and the harshness of its consequences make it difficult not to take its political fiction seriously. The illusion of everyday life under an authoritarian regime is almost too convincing for comfort.

THE ILLUSION OF EVERYDAY LIFE UNDER AN AUTHORITARIAN REGIME IS ALMOST TOO CONVINCING FOR COMFORT

After all, lives depend on your decisions and performance, and not just those of strangers. At the end of each day, you're presented with a balance of your earnings and expenses. To keep your extended family alive and well, you'll need enough for food, heat, and rent (and sometimes irregular expenses like medicine, a birthday present for your son or even forged passports to escape Arstotzka with as many family members as you can afford).

Your meagre earnings vary according to the number of applicants you manage to 'process' each day, meaning that you're constantly under pressure to cut corners to save time, which in turn leads to more errors and fines. The number of slip-ups you can afford is a resource in itself. There are times when it is in your interest to make a 'mistake'. Perhaps you're being coerced, or



there's a fat bribe waiting for you if you break the rules. Or perhaps you're simply moved by the plight of a refugee. Since your first two errors each day are warnings without a fine, you'll try to save your 'free' mistakes for when you need them the most. Making an honest mistake and hearing the grating sound of the citation being printed quickly becomes the most dreaded and stressful moment in the game.

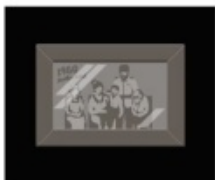
There are three separate screens to keep track of at any time, and your desk becomes increasingly cluttered as the game progresses, making things even more stressful

Arstotzka's authoritarian regime appears inescapable and inflexible, but there are still blind spots an insignificant cog like your inspector can exploit. Corruption and bribes are so commonplace they can be seen as an integral part of the system, and surviving the game is almost impossible without relying regularly on illicit sources of money. One corrupt border guard urges you to detain as many people as possible since there's a bonus in it for him. If you do as he asks, you get a cut from his ill-gotten gains. Abusing the system this way doesn't get you punished. It's immoral and exploitative, but in Arstotzka, it's business as usual.

Restrictions, and bending them just enough to be able to live within them, are at the heart of the game. What makes this work so well is that the political system



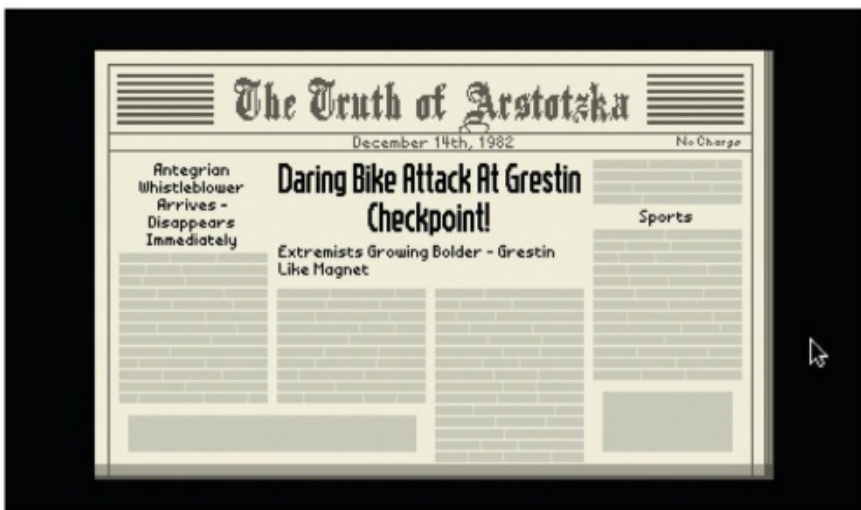
Most of the endings, including the ones involving your or your family's demise, end with the message "Glory to Arstotzka"



PAPER CUTS

Papers, Please has 20 possible endings, most of which involve the death of your family or your inspector being sentenced to death (or, if you're lucky, to forced labour). If you finish the game without major transgressions against the regime, the border remains open and you'll receive the dubious reward of a code that will unlock 'endless mode' – an ironic acknowledgement of your continued bondage to the system. Your only hope of escape is either to flee the country with your family and become a refugee yourself, or to help EZIC establish a new order.

The newspaper *The Truth of Arstotzka* keeps you up to date with current events, some of which will affect that working day



At the end of each day, a screen breaks down your finances and the condition and health of your family

of Arstotzka is nearly indistinguishable from the systems of the game; the rules you have to follow as a player are the rules of the regime, and if you fail to follow them, the game's punishment is also the regime's.

From the moment you hit Start this conflation of game systems and political ones becomes apparent. Rather than a removed, extra-diegetic narration, the first words that greet you come directly from the regime: "Congratulations. The October labor lottery is complete. Your name was pulled. For immediate placement, report to the Ministry Of Admission at Grestin Border Checkpoint." Once inside the game, there's no tutorial text telling you how the game works. Instead, there are bulletins from the regime's Ministry Of Admissions and a book of guidelines for immigration inspectors. Officials from the ministry visit the border checkpoint, sometimes with

additional instructions. The real authority here, the game makes clear, isn't in the hands of a game designer winking at us conspiratorially from behind the transparent walls of the game, but a totalitarian state that won't hesitate to let its own employees and their families starve.

It's an illusion, of course, but an extremely convincing one. The game's systems aren't quite coincident with the regime's, as becomes evident once you realise that you do have some power to subvert it from within. At first, you might bend the rules to help refugees. Later on, you perhaps decide to break them to help EZIC to destroy the regime. Either way, *Papers, Please* lets players experience the immense pressures as well as the small but meaningful acts of rebellion.

Papers, Please demonstrates what it's like to be a part of an oppressive system. It's a bleak experience, and of its 20 endings, only a handful could be considered happy, and even those are not free of ambiguity. But even though it toys with a cynical world view, it never entirely succumbs to it. There are still glimpses of humanity, hope and even humour to be found in brief moments and interactions. You may be nothing but a cog, but there's power even in being the smallest part of a machine. Whether you decide to run smoothly, to jam once in a while, or to set off a chain reaction that threatens the entire mechanism, you will make choices that feel weightier than those found in most power fantasies combined. ■



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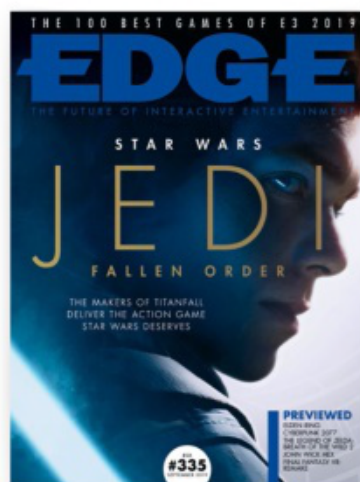
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T H E L O N G G A M E

A progress report on the games we just can't quit



Destiny 2

Developer/publisher Bungie Format PC, PS4, Xbox One Release 2017

Bungie can't lose at the moment. Six months on from its split with former publisher Activision, the *Destiny* maker has the rare ability of being able to blame all the things players don't like about its game on its former partner, while pitching all the good stuff as the product of its new-found independence. In fairness, there's much more of the latter around at the moment than the former. Indeed, as the clock runs down on *Destiny 2*'s second year, the series has never been in better shape.

The groundwork was laid while Activision was still around, with last September's *Forsaken* introducing a new approach to content releases in between the major autumn expansions. The Annual Pass has added new things to do each season, focusing mainly on a single major activity. Last winter's Season Of The Forge was a messy thing, full of potential but riddled with grind, and based around a new activity, Black Armory, that was too repetitive. Three months later, Season Of The Drifter focused on Gambit, the PvPvE mode that turned off more players than it attracted. Yet with Season Of Opulence, Bungie has finally cracked it.

The basis for it all is a new activity, Menagerie, that finally addresses one of the most frequent criticisms of *Destiny*: that its six-player raids have been limited to

pre-made teams. The Menagerie is the first six-player PvE activity in *Destiny*'s history to support matchmaking, and occupies a hitherto unexplored middle ground between matchmade strikes and pre-made raid teams. There are mechanics that force players to work together, yes. But there is no real fail state either, at least on normal difficulty. Your team is sent scurrying around a maze between different encounters; completing them fills a bar that, when maxed out, unlocks the final boss battle. Fail a fight, and you simply move on to the next; you'll still finish it eventually, it just might take you a little longer.

Two years into *Destiny 2*'s life, the game is bursting with things to do. Bungie's greatest achievement is that, despite the long, difficult process of putting the RPG grind back into a game that hardened players felt had been overly simplified, *Destiny* has never been more friendly to the casual player. Back in the *D1* era, we didn't just have a regular raid team because raiding was fun; it was also the only way you could play the game every night of the week. Now the solo player can dip in and out as they please, do what they like and watch the numbers go up regardless. Just as well, really. Our raid team quit months ago. If Bungie keeps on like this, we expect they'll be back before long. ■



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